Interview with Stanton H. Burnett

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STANTON H. BURNETT

Interviewed by: Pat Nieburg

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Q: This is an interview with Stanton H. Burnett which is taking place at the Center for Strategic and International Studies at 1800 K Street, NW, in Washington, DC.Stan retired from the top job in USIA as Counselor of the Agency in 1988. Prior to that he had various key positions in USIA such as Counselor for Public Affairs in Rome, the same position at the US Mission to NATO, and as Director of Research.

Burnett's Chaotic Entrance into USIA

Stan, let me ask you, what brought you to USIA in the first place and when did you join?

BURNETT: Well, Pat, I suspect that what brought me into USIA was that USIA had an overseas post that nobody wanted and they were having great trouble filling it. If the truth be known, I think that the post was so lousy that they were having trouble.

I had left teaching at a university to spend a year in Washington doing a book, had finished the book sooner than I had anticipated and it was in the late spring of '67 that I happened to be at a dinner one night and one of the people at the dinner — I didn't know it — was Mark Lewis who was the Director of African Affairs at that time for USIA.

We were discussing the literary generation of the "30s and what the Spanish Civil War had done for a lot of American writers, that it had injected a romantic adventure into their lives — it was good for their literature. I must have expressed some sort of regret that there was nothing like that these days because Lewis — and I didn't know the job that he held — said, oh, yes, there is, there's some terrific things going on in the Congo, it's very exciting. The few people who get down there are well able to romanticize it.

I said something to the effect that I wished I could go there. It was the next week, early the next week, that I got a call from Lewis, whom I remembered from the dinner. He identified himself and said, “If you're serious about that, I'd like to talk to you.” I went down.

What he was talking about was the town of Bukavu in what was then the Congo, Congo Kinshasa, now Zaire. He said that if all goes well with Personnel, I think we could bring you in, you're old enough — I was over 31 — so that you can't take the foreign service exam, but you're eligible for what they called lateral entry and you could come in and at least do that job for us.

I had no intention of leaving teaching, but the idea of having a lark before I went back appealed to me. So, I decided to do it despite the fact that I had a wife and two kids and a good teaching position to go back to. The university agreed to have the fellow who was substituting for me stay one more year.1967: First (Intended) Post: Bukavu in the Congo

It was important that I got out there fast and so it was a whirlwind. I don't even remember the number of days, but they were very few. I felt like it was almost that week that I was sworn in. I was given no training. I had no idea what a country plan was or quarterly budgets or going rates, or anything like that.

I didn't know anything about the Agency, how it worked. I had the feeling that largely they wanted somebody out there to show the flag. It was a share-and-share arrangement at the post. That is, in Bukavu the USIA man stamped passports for State, and I think it was up in

Kisangani the State man ran a little cultural center. They were obviously just interested in getting somebody out there.

At National Airport I was paged and was told on the phone that my family couldn't accompany me because things had gotten worse in the Congo and they would have to go to the R&R address. I didn't even know what R&R was, let alone an address, which was somewhere in Europe. Since my wife's parents lived in The Hague anyway, we decided that they would simply go there.

So I flew off to Kinshasa alone, which was the first surprise, and landed — this was really the end of the turmoil in the Congo. It was the Joseph Schramm rebellion, which was the last gasp of old Belgian planters and Mike Hoare and a few mercenaries plus the Katangese Congolese mercenaries raising hell around the interior of the Congo.

Chaos in Congo: Rebels Had Captured Bukavu—No Job for Burnett

I got to Kinshasa and they gave me a drafting job. The first diplomatic cable I ever wrote announced the loss of my post because the rebels had gotten to Bukavu before I could — I probably should have known at the time that the signs weren't with me — which led to an immediate discussion as to what they were going to do with me.

The Agency graciously said that they would pay all the expenses. It appeared that there was no job and they didn't have assignments for me and, you know, would I mind terribly — this just hadn't worked out. I had to explain that somebody was now teaching my classes, living in my house. It was all agreed. I said that it would be awfully decent of the Agency if they could keep me on the payroll for a year somehow because it would be embarrassing and difficult to go back.

Q: Let me interrupt with just one question.

BURNETT: Yeah.

Q: When they sent you off what was your charge? Were you an information officer, a consular officer? What were you supposed to do?

BURNETT: I guess I was a Branch PAO because I was the only person there, State or USIA. It was one person and four or five Congolese employees. That was it.

At the post at the time were some of the great names of the Agency. The PAO was at that time one of the highest ranking men in the Agency, George Hellyer. George had come in as a 1 at the beginning of the Agency. He was the second Director of Asian Affairs.

He was the PAO. He had already come from his adventures as JUSPAO in Vietnam, throwing leaflets out of airplanes while lying on the floor of the airplane and all. Rudy Aggrey, who went on to a distinguished career in the Agency and then as an ambassador, was the Deputy PAO. But important to my situation was that the CAO was somebody who I hope gets in on this project — Hank Ryan.

PAO and Agency Agree to Let Burnett Serve in Kinshasa as Assistant PAO

Hank Ryan had left his post as Dean of Students at Howard University to come with the Agency. A very distinguished gent and particularly for Africa, just an outstanding CAO — I learned that later because I didn't have any powers of judgment at that time.

Hank said, “Wait a minute. Hang around just a little bit. A guy is about to leave. Let me talk to Hellyer and all because I think I can use you as a Deputy CAO,” or Assistant CAO — ACAO — in Kinshasa. Then, if things open up in the east, you can go in.

That was the deal that was eventually consummated, although my family still had to stay out. I spent the first seven months — I think it was — of my foreign service career with my family in this refugee status. There was nobody at the post except — of the women and children who normally accompany an officer — Dotty Frey, the secretary was the only woman at the post, a friend of so many of ours. It was like wartime conditions at the time.

In the Wartime Conditions of the Rebellion, USIA Program Very Limited

So, I worked with Hank in the few things you could do. There wasn't a lot you could do under those conditions. We'd pop out to the university whenever we could and tried occasionally to run a bit of a program. The Agency wasn't putting many resources into that situation right then.

The people that were of interest to us as exchangees were unwilling to leave the country because as soon as you left the country all sorts of terrible things happened to you politically under the Mobutu regime.

So the program was fairly limited. But there were some things to do. We did maintain a presence and occasionally, in the face of all the difficulties, we did, I think, stage some awfully good things.

There are other things that happened during that time. For example -

— But Post Managed to Stage Some Interesting Programs With Visiting American Artists

Q: What kind of good things did you stage, though?

BURNETT: We actually — and Mobutu was insisting we try to treat it as business as usual. Would you believe that in this war situation we brought in, for the first overseas performance of something that became an Agency staple, the Alvin Ailey Dancers. There probably isn't an officer in the Agency that hasn't programed the Alvin Ailey Dancers at one point.

This was their first overseas performance and it was important because Alvin and I had at one point been the two-man faculty of the Clark Center for the Performing Arts in New York. So, it was partly my doing. So he came out.

It was an interesting period. I remember also showing up at the post was the daughter of Walter Washington, the first mayor of Washington.

It was a time when a lot of American blacks were going to Africa to discover their roots and in many cases finding that they were more American than anything else. They had great trouble adjusting to conditions in a place like the Congo. We became close to many of them because they tended, frankly, to huddle up to the American community when they saw, frankly, how little they had in common with the Africans there.

The Ailey Dancers, I remember, flew into town, checked into the only working hotel in Kinshasa. We finally checked them in at about 8:00 in the evening. I drove out to my house, which was up on a hill called, Jelo-Binza. About an hour and a half later this group of about five taxis pulls in front of my house with all of the Alvin Ailey Dancers. They were so appalled by the accommodations at the hotel that they said, “Look, this won't work. Can we stay with you?”

I had a pretty big house. As I remember, there were 13 or 14 dancers. So, the first night overseas of this great group that did so much for the Agency was spent on every couch and chair, and some on the floor, of my house. But we actually staged some performances.

We also brought in Buddy Guy, a blues group, at that time. We did a lot of things with the university in the way of Hank and I just simply making a lot of personal appearances, the things you do out there — talking about the country.

Policy Objectives for Country Were Unheard Of —

Q: What did you try to accomplish with these programs in terms of a policy objective? Or, was a policy objective just an elusive dream at that point?

BURNETT: Pat, I don't know what the policy objective was. It was only later in my career that I realized you had to have a policy objective, and began trying to think strategically about public diplomacy.

I don't know what Hank had in mind. It seemed that the things we were doing felt like good things, that they were helping some Congolese to understand a little bit about the United States. That seemed like a good thing.

We were writing some interesting cables. We were doing a lot, I think, of some interesting political reporting about what was happening in the Congo because we were in touch with sectors that the embassy wasn't.

— And Neither USIA/Washington Nor PAO Offered Direction

But I have to tell you that I don't recall a single meeting or paper from Washington or from the PAO that gave a serious sense of direction to the program. Maybe it was a wartime condition, maybe showing the flag and doing anything we could was considered good.

Your point is an important one because I thought back about that later and decided later that I never wanted to repeat that experience or have other officers repeat it, of feeling as much at sea as I felt.

Then you add to that the fact that you as you drive out to the university there would be the American military assistance program off in the field teaching the Congolese gendarmes how to break heads. Clearly having more to do with keeping Mobutu in power than defending the country against rebels or outside aggression, which left a bitter taste in my mouth.

I had serious substantive doubts about the program I was executing and about the American presence and about the extent to which we were getting close to Mobutu. He clearly was the American — Tshombe was gone — he clearly was the American

preference because it was thought that the alternative — Lumumba was dead by then but the alternatives were still the Lumumba-esque radicals.

Q: Let me interject just one question. You give me a key word, "wartime conditions" in 1967 and '68 — the height of the Vietnam conflict — and you were somewhat at sea in the way that your original job fell through or was captured —

BURNETT: Right.

Q: — by political circumstances. Was there any effort to kind of sequester you and send you off to Vietnam? I mean, were you aware of that or was there talk of that?

BURNETT: Aware of the possibility. I'm sure it weighed on other officer's minds. But you have to understand that my mind set was that I was still a professor on vacation intending to have my time in the Congo and go back. The Agency was talking about two years. I, frankly, wasn't sure that it would be more than one.

Q: So you didn't think of joining USIA as a career opportunity?

BURNETT: Absolutely not.

Q: Rather, as an interlude or a sabbatical —

BURNETT: Merely for —

Q: — for the experience?

BURNETT: That's right. That's right. I had pretty much leveled with Mark Lewis about that. He was so relieved to get a warm body willing to go to Bukavu that — because I really think he had a problem. I don't think he had any officers that were willing to go. And while we're to be available for worldwide assignments and officers accept orders, there is a point

at which the guy you're sending is so unhappy about it that you worry about whether it's a reasonable assignment.

Q: What happened to you after Africa, after that rather interesting experience?

Bizarre Period: Example — the Annual Marine Ball

BURNETT: Well, let me tell you that eventually things calmed down. About seven months later families came in. Although it was a bizarre period.

I still remember that Mobutu insisted on business as usual and when he heard that we were scheduled for the Marine Ball, the annual Marine Ball, without families or anything, I remember he prevailed on the ambassador — he insisted that the American Marine Ball go ahead. But there weren't any women.

I have to admit that Hank and I went out and got the dancing partners for the Marine Ball down in the Cite. I don't think anybody really wanted to know what these ladies did for a living. But we had a Marine Ball with a cake that the ranking Marine officer cut.

Q: The gunny cut, yes.

BURNETT: The gunny cut it and we did the proper thing, but with a very strange bunch of dancing partners for it. So, it was strange period.

Things Settle Down a Bit. PAO Hellyer Creates Field Officer Position for Burnett: Programs taken to Interior via Mobil Oil-Operated Piper Cub

Things did settle down and the families came in and we had something more like a normal program. I was running the exchange program. But I was itchy to get into the interior and see to see what Bukavu was.

About ten months in George Hellyer invented a job called Field Program Officer and added that. So I was ACAO and Field Program Officer. Because they cut a deal with Mobil Oil. Mobil Oil ran a small Piper Aztec plane in the Congo but couldn't afford to run it every week. We agreed to pick it up every other week.

My job was to load it up with some films and a couple of projectors, some books, and go out and do an “America Week.” I asked, I remember, for a set of priorities as to what places in the interior were most important. They didn't have any idea so I'm afraid I picked my own places out of such policy guidance journals as National Geographic to decide where I wanted to go.

Bukavu was still occupied so I couldn't get in there. But we started going into some of the small towns that the rebels had recently left. We would fly in and we would do the America Week. Usually the only Europeans that they had seen would be if there were some monks that had stayed around doing some teaching. You would hit these tiny towns in which the only two Europeans left would be two Belgian priests who were there teaching the African kids in the middle of the jungle Flemish, teaching them Dutch. A more absurd enterprise couldn't be imagined.

But when we would roll in, it would be a big event. I remember at one point two priests with tears in their eyes. They were so happy to see us, the first outsiders that had come in. Actually, we landed in the ruined field of a plantation to go in there.

They said, “We're going to have something special for dinner that we've been waiting to break out at this moment.” So we finally agreed to have dinner that night with the priests. When we did, one of them excused himself to get this. Of course, I had heard the stories and I figured that they had a cellar and they had some fine wines that they had put aside for just this moment.

The guy came back — tears once again in their eyes — in fact, more so because I think what they were getting meant more to them than to us. The guy came back and what he had was a jar of jam. So we had bread and this jam that they had been saving through all the several rebellions of the Congo.

They were kind of tough trips. Often we were sleeping in lean-tos and the sorts of places where you pound the wall in the dark in frustration and then turn your flashlight on — just pounding blindly on the wall — there's blood on the wall from all the mosquitos that you've crunched just by striking out at random.

Q: Did you have local employees with you and what was the language — the lingua franca?

BURNETT: The lingua franca was French to the extent — and it was not always comprehensible where we were. We had to look for places where at least some of the senior people in the village would have some French.

We didn't have, because it was a two-seater — so, it was a Belgian pilot and me — a lot was done through interpretation and we had to find one person in the area who had French and the local language. There's about 250 distinct languages in the Congo so that could be anything. It wasn't any use taking along somebody from Kinshasa who spoke Lingala because that guy wouldn't have been any help in the interior anyway.

Eventual Entrance into Bukavu — A Happy Surprise

Eventually I did get into Bukavu when that opened up. There was no field there and I had to land in Bujumbura and take about a six-hour drive in a pickup through gorilla — gorilla not guerilla, fortunately — country; that was very exciting.

The road, you know, had room for just one vehicle, so that they had pygmies down from the north whose job was to be at places along the road with oil cans. They would beat on

the oil cans to announce that a vehicle was coming one way so a vehicle couldn't start coming the other way because there was only room for one. I remember arriving in Bukavu and I was beige colored, covered with the dust from the road throughout.

Bukavu itself was a gorgeous place. Why they had trouble getting somebody to go there, I can't imagine. It was like Switzerland in the middle of Africa.

Q: Nobody knew what it was like, I suppose.

BURNETT: That may be. I remember that the one European left was a barkeep in a hotel. I still remember that he had this picture window that overlooked Lake Kivu, this incredibly beautiful scene. But he had turned his bar around so that he faced the other way. He faced a huge photo of Lake Geneva. So, he was hanging on.

One thing we wanted to do was to pay the Congolese employees who hadn't been paid at the time that the last American left. Even though I'm sure they hadn't done anything in the meantime, they had been on the payroll and so we were honorable men and we were going to pay them. I had the names — I forget what the name was of the senior employee — but I had more than 90 people claiming that they were him. Sorting that out got difficult because I didn't have a photo or anything. So, there were some complications.

I spent some terrific months running around the interior. Off and on the boat on the lake, which was the way you went to Goma, which was the other way out of the area — Goma had a landing strip up in the volcano country and it was great.

But on one of the trips the Belgian pilot was using maps showing the plantations that had little landing strips and all, and occasionally you'd come down and you'd have to go up because the rebels had torn them up and the defenders had torn them up and rolled oil cans out on them so they weren't viable and we had to go on to the next.

The Piper Cub's Demise — No Human Casualties But Field Program Ended

We just got very unlucky one time with short gas. We must have hit a dozen strips that although they showed up on the map they weren't any good when we went over them. You had to land uphill often because they were so short. You had to have that going for you also.

So we ran out of gas and he decided that he had to crash land. He, himself, was panicked at the last minute too and put no gear down, although they might have helped because it wasn't a bad field that we were on. So we came in on our belly and the plane which was made out of fiberglass just completely came apart. The two engines of the little Piper Aztec — we paced it off for more than 200 paces one from another.

Q: Wow.

BURNETT: Like a little eggshell, the cockpit held together pretty well. While we were badly bruised, there was no fire or anything else. In effect, we walked away from it — actually, we ran away from it if the truth be known.

The Walk to Bujumbura

Q: You live a charmed life.

BURNETT: Then we had a long walk to finally find a farmhouse and they were able to get word out — the closest place where there was any official was the border between Burundi and the Congo — got there and word was sent into the embassy in Bujumbura that there was an unhappy American. Walked out to the border.

By the way, it must have been a three-seater because in this case I had a State Department officer with me. There were two of us. As a matter of fact, I remember him sort of crouched in back. Whether he was hitching a ride or going in to do a little political reporting — he's still around, Tony Dalsimer at State.

We walked out and then went to Bujumbura. We stayed around Bujumbura partly because there were no flights out at the time but also kind of until some of our bruises went down a bit — for about, I think, it was a week and a half — drinking cognac on the terrace of the hotel there. It was certainly the romantic existence that I had bargained for.

We sent a message just speaking of mechanical difficulties because we didn't want to worry our families or anybody by talking about that in fact the plane had gone down and was totaled. So we finally got out. But that was the end of my days as a field program officer because we didn't have any planes.

Q: You couldn't have used the radio that was on the plane, or something, for communications, could you? That was gone?

BURNETT: Either it was too weak or it went too — the pilot did not radio anywhere and I don't remember why. That was the end of that.

Burnett Leaves Congo Feeling He Had Accomplished Little — Mobutu Destroyed Student Generation He Had Cultivated and Removed from Office Officials Sent to US on Leader Grants

I served out the tour, the remaining months, as the ACAO and, in fact, Acting CAO for a good part of the time because we had an officer who came in following Hank Ryan who reacted badly to the Congo, was afraid of it and finally had to be evacuated. The conditions were still bad enough that it drove him to drink, frankly, and we had to put him on the plane home.

There's some funny anecdotes about that but there is a point at which we've got to move on. So, if we have time, I'll go back to that. It shows the government and its peculiar work.

But, to go back to your earlier question, Pat, I left the Congo feeling that I had had a wonderfully romantic time, I couldn't have asked for anything better, a feeling of almost

no accomplishment because the generation that we had been talking to at the university — Mobutu felt that they were a source of dissent and rebellion and he took that entire generation of university students and conscripted them into the Army and fanned them out around the Congo. He destroyed a generation of university students.

Most of the people that we sent on leader grants to the States were removed from office while they were in the States. Mobutu used them that way — of getting them out of the country — so we almost stopped having that kind of program.

I felt that we were kind of building on sand. We were getting increasingly close to a dictator and I felt that historically we would regret that association. But you could understand it, Brazzaville went Communist, to use the journalistic phrase, during that time — right across the river, we could even hear the gunshots from Kinshasa.

But we were there. For example, the OAU Summit was held in Kinshasa at that time and it was a treat. We got to meet all the great leaders of the African states at that time, Obote and Senghor, and all of that. So, there were some thrills during that period.

Abortive Visit of Justice Thurgood Marshall to Louvanium University a Near Disaster, Threatening Disaffected Students Vice President Humphrey decided to come.

We had a visit by the Vice President. It's nice to remember. I was in charge of Thurgood Marshall, who was part of his entourage. In fact, this may have led to Mobutu's cleaning out the university, or at least was a part of it.

We were heading up toward the university in two cars — I guess three cars — there was a security car and then a car that I was in and then a car that Thurgood Marshall was in. The idea was that the law faculty, such as it was, at Louvanium University, was supposed to be out on the steps of the law faculty to greet Thurgood Marshall and he would come in and have a chat with them.

It was clear that there was trouble at the university as we drove up. The security car went through. We went through. But as soon as we saw the situation, we radioed back and told Marshall's car to turn around and go back to Kinshasa, which they did. Meanwhile, we were trapped by — and students angry that they couldn't get their hands on Marshall decided that I was the only American — I still remember, they rocked the car, they broke the windows, we were spat upon. Finally I prevailed on the driver to throw it into reverse, and hoping we wouldn't hit anybody, to back up across a lawn. Doing some defensive driving, we got out of the university by another exit.

That was scarier than most other things there because the students were so disaffected that you had the feeling they were capable of virtually anything. They were not any of the students that I knew. There was nobody speaking up saying, “I know this guy. He's all right.”

Q: What do you mean disaffected? With society as a whole, with their own government —

BURNETT: With the regime.

Q: — or the regime?

BURNETT: They were anti-Mobutu and the feeling was — I think 20-some years later that's still the feeling there — that Mobutu is being propped up by the US So, we were bearing some of the brunt of it.

Dramatic times also. Martin Luther King was assassinated during that time. Handling that in Africa — as all the officers who served in Africa had to do. I don't have any story different from most of them.

Congolese Didn't Believe US Moon Landing — Considered it a Staged Fake

The one trouble we had — the moon landing occurred during that time. I did what I thought was a terrific display. It was then 16mm film, a loop running all the time with it. It wasn't making much of an impact, either the thing in the window in downtown Kinshasa or they had some sort of trade fair and we'd put it out there. I was amazed — it wasn't very bigstuff.

I started asking people why not and found the reason was, interestingly enough, that they didn't believe we had done it. It was a simple problem of credibility. You know, they looked at the moon regularly and they didn't see anything different. They simply didn't believe we had done it.

So, the gee whiz that I'd expected didn't work at all. No amount of getting a moon rock or anything would have helped. We just despaired and we finally gave up. We never convinced most of our audience that we had landed on the moon.

Q: Did any astronauts come to Africa?

BURNETT: Well, I'm sure much later. But things were too turbulent. Although I mentioned a lot of the things we did, nevertheless everything was — even the Ailey Dancers were probably ill-advised to come but I'm glad they did.

1969: Burnett Decides to Leave USIA, But is Offered Information Officer (IO) Job at US Mission to NATO and Goes to Brussels

I decided to leave the Agency. I sent a cable saying this was terrific, I'm going back to teaching. But George Vest, who later became Director General of the Foreign Service -Q: Let interrupt you. When you said, “I decided at that point,” what time was that?

BURNETT: Well, this would have been two years in. I came in in '67, so this would have been the winter of '68/'69. I had really enjoyed it. I saw no future for myself. I still didn't

have any picture of what public diplomacy was, a term we didn't use then, of course. I wasn't all that interested in the work really.

I had a call from George Vest who from being DCM at our mission to the European communities had just been transferred over to be DCM at our mission to NATO. I had known him before, just a casual acquaintance. He called to say that they had just lost their IO, which was the number two man in the post, but they didn't have a number one man. So, he was the only man there — and he was about to leave. He was Ernie Wiener, a friend of many of ours, who was ill at that time — he had to leave.

George said, “Nixon says this is going to be an era of negotiations. If you want to come here, I can get you on some of the delegations. I think you'll find it interesting. Why don't you delay your departure and come up.” It was one of those offers you just can't refuse. I remember sending a telegram saying, “Ignore previous about my decision to leave.” George, sure enough, fixed it up.

So I went into Brussels — left alone, having no idea of what my mission really was there either — as for many months the only person on the ground for USIA at NATO.

There were some smart folks at the other missions. I remember both. Dean — oh, boy, I forget his name. He was PAO at USEC, our mission to the European Communities. But the number two man was Jon Kordak.

Q: Oh, yes.

BURNETT: So, there was a lot of wisdom there. I remember that I decided to read the —

Q: It was Dean Clausson.

BURNETT: Dean Clausson. That's right. Thank you, Pat. He was the PAO. Art Bardos was at our embassy.

I remember reading the files. My two predecessors, each of which had stayed a year — Ernie had stayed a year and before that it was Eleanor Green, who stayed a year. Neither of them had seemed to get their hooks into it that much. I couldn't really understand it but I went back for three years — there was still stuff in the files — to find the files of Jim Rentschler.

Rentschler had a clear idea of what he was doing. He and Harlan Cleveland had a good relationship. So I sort of went to school partly on Jim's old papers and talking to folks and slowly but surely got the idea of what we should be doing at NATO.

After a Year on Job, a More Senior Officer Sent Out as IO

I had from the summer of '69 — I extended one year so it was the summer of '74 then — five of the grandest years imaginable at NATO. I had run the place for I think close to a year when the Agency decided it was time to send in a proper PAO. Remember, I was — I think by then I'd come in as a — I forget — I think a 6 and I worked my way up to a 5. So, I was very junior and they decided they needed a senior officer. It was an important post, and they were going to send one in.

I thought that was my cue to leave because by that time I was used to running my own show. I was told to wait until I saw the cut of the jib of the new PAO, that they thought it was somebody that I would like and somebody who would respect what I had done there and that it would be a good relationship.

So, very skeptical and figuring that was my cue to go back to teaching, I waited. The officer they sent in was Bill Hamilton.

Q: Oh, yes.

Burnett Remains as No. 2 Man: Acts as Ad Hoc IO for American Delegation to Series of Conferences and Visits to European Capitals Talking About NATO Issues

BURNETT: Bill, who is — there is no more decent man in all of our service and the relationship — I hope he's saying the same thing if he's in this study — the relationship was a good one from the beginning. Early on I said I'd be delighted to spend my time with this man as my boss.

So we just had a wonderful — I had, as I said, five years there. George Vest was as good as his word. I got in on the very end of the Berlin negotiations and got in on SALT I. In those days they didn't carry a USIS officer with the delegations. You'd fly in on TDY when there would be events that would involve a lot of press, and NATO, where the consultations were taking place, was the logical place to fly the person in from.

I was in for all of the preparatory round and most of the first round of the European Security Conference, as it was called then. Finally Hans Holzapfel came in and took that job eventually, but I did the first two rounds — all on TDY. I was there for the preparatory round and the first round — I'm sorry, Hans came in to MBFR —

Q: Yes.

BURNETT: I forget. I guess nobody relieved me directly — at CSCE in Helsinki. That's right, I remember writing a memo to George Vest, who at that point had gone up as head of our delegation to the European Security Conference in Helsinki for the round — he had left NATO — and I said, “You're the most natural press spokesman I've ever seen, you don't need anybody to do this work for you. I suggest you not have anybody,” and I left.

Of course, he went on to be State Department press spokesman. But for MBFR I was there for the first two rounds; that's the one which Hans came in and took over.

So, I just had this glorious period, not only being in on all the delegations, but the series of excellent ambassadors that included Bob Ellsworth and Don Rumsfeld. What they wanted

was they wanted me out around Europe talking about NATO issues to the European media.

Q: Was that also the period of the neutron device —

BURNETT: No. The neutron bomb came later.

Q: Later. I'm sorry.

BURNETT: Remind me of it later because I still have egg on my face for that.

Bill accepted that way of working so I got to be the cowboy out running around. My USIA colleagues were wonderful. Vic was the IO — Vic Olason was the IO in Bonn. I kicked around. The big cities in Europe I must have been hitting once every six weeks simply to do nothing more than have a drink with the important journalists in those areas.

I got to know Michel Tatu and Andre Fontaine very well. I would work Fleet Street. In an afternoon I would probably see two dozen guys I knew, many of whom have remained good friends.

There was a lot happening at NATO at that time. The US policy was of interest to everybody. It was a terrific job.

Agency and State Guidance on NATO Policy Issues Inadequate - Burnett Relied on the Well-Informed American Ambassadors at NATO to Obtain Accurate Policy Guidance

Q: Let me ask you a question. To be the point man, sort of, in Europe and going out and meeting people, how did you, yourself, keep yourself abreast of policy and developments? I mean substantively so that you had something to offer to your interlocutors?

BURNETT: Well, that's an important point. The guidance we received from Washington by normal USIA or State channels was inadequate to that task. Your point is well-taken.

I felt that we were, either in terms of substantive policy unclassified and usable, or, in terms, more importantly, of guidance as to what was the strategy for creating the political climate that was necessary and the public diplomacy role, we received not much of anything.

That's why I mentioned the ambassadors. In general, the ambassadors there were important people well-connected in the White House with a lot of elbow room consequently. They weren't making policy but they were taking the policy that was there, devising what the public face should be, and working with us to devise our charge. We were writing a lot of our own menu there.

An example was that our US policy was to oppose the European Security Conference. It became clear at a certain point that that was going to be turned around, that we were going to wind up in the European Security Conference. I remember Bob Ellsworth giving me the charge.

We decided what the climate would be for going into a conference for the West to get what the West was interested in. We were thinking about — we didn't use the term “baskets” because it hadn't been invented — but we were thinking about human rights and so forth. So that became a part of my charge, a part of the thing informally, not in a way where I could be quoted.

We started laying the groundwork already for the sorts of things that would be the West's fundamental interest in heading into a security conference.

It was largely Ellsworth and Rumsfeld going out on a limb. Both of them were extremely shrewd about public diplomacy.

Q: Let me ask you a question so that we have this very clear. That means you had an opportunity to spend a good bit of time with Ellsworth and Rumsfeld and being briefed

by them and getting your orders from them. Or, was this a hand-me-down — (end of tape) ...how you received the charge for doing the point job that you did for NATO.

BURNETT: Okay. NATO is a combined mission. That is, there are as many Defense Department people at that mission as there are State Department people. Consequently, the makeup of the country team is something the ambassador is always very careful about, and all the agencies represented there are also carefully represented around the table.

But the personalities involved — the key people were George Vest who was the DCM, and Bill Hamilton who was the PAO. They decided early on that since I was largely functioning as the spokesman, I should be there too.

So Bill and I were there every morning at the meetings and Ellsworth and Rumsfeld and Vest, who had long periods between ambassadors as the charge', used those meetings carefully. So we were fully on top of everything that was on the platter in the mission at that time.

Then, to work out what the public line should be — what the ambassador should be saying, what I should be saying as I ran around, and what we also should be coaching the NATO spokesmen down on the international side to say. We spent hours alone with Ellsworth, with Rumsfeld, with Vest, working it out.

They had, all three of them, a belief that public diplomacy was half the game, that the political climate relative to NATO was what determined defense budgets, support in Europe for the Alliance, and everything else. They took it very seriously, were very good at thinking about it.

I was in an unusually good situation in terms of communication with the ambassador and ambassadorial understanding.

There was an — I've got to tell you. Ellsworth left and then there was a long period with Vest as DCM. Those were great days because Vest understood it.

Then there was another ambassador that I haven't mentioned. They appointed David Kennedy, the former Secretary of the Treasury — David M. Kennedy from Utah — as ambassador. He was pretty much an absentee landlord. They also gave him the charge of selling shoes in Spain, or something like that. He had some trade negotiation responsibilities at the same time he was ambassador to NATO and he never was very interested in it. He was a wonderful man but Vest was running the mission. Kennedy never took hold and we never had this kind of relationship with him.

My one memory was that I got some sort of award from the Agency for this work and it was to be awarded on Kennedy's watch. The usual thing — the family comes in, there's a photographer, and you get your plaque. I still remember Kennedy, who was a grandfatherly man — my son was about four or five and Kennedy was warm and nice to him as we stood around afterwards holding champagne glasses. I could see my whole life and career passing before my eyes when this happened.

He said to my son, “What's your name?” He said, “My name is Matthew David Burnett.” Kennedy said, “What a coincidence. I am David M. Kennedy. Would you believe the coincidence. What do you think the 'M' stands for?” My four year old son says, “Daddy says it stands for money.” (Laughter.)

BURNETT: That was not a good day. I hope that Kennedy was deaf.

Q: I need to interrupt you once more because this has a great bearing that you will understand, especially in relation to the fact that you were later counselor of the Agency. Here you were, a USIA officer basically working out of Brussels on NATO, which is an area-wide responsibility. What was your relationship with the post?

Let me be specific. There were political problems with NATO or within the substantive areas of NATO in Belgium and Denmark. Each situation was somewhat different and some of them quite sensitive, if I recall correctly. Now here you come out of NATO and you come “charging” into a country. How did you work it out with the post? What was the coordination? How did it work? And how was it from your point of view?

BURNETT: Well, you raise an excellent question, Pat, because with some posts it was difficult at the beginning. At the end, everything was very smooth.

I guess I mentioned Vic Olason (in Bonn) because he was the one guy who welcomed it from the beginning, understood how it could help, and meshed it perfectly with what he was doing. I don't remember who his PAO then was but he had support all the way up the line.

In most of the countries that were of concern to us — and I wasn't going throughout Europe the whole time. I never went to — I guess I went twice to Lisbon. But we're talking about London and The Hague, Bonn, Paris, Rome. Interestingly enough, I went frequently into Madrid, though they were not a member of the Alliance at the time, but it was important to keep talking Alliance to the Spaniards.

There was usually somebody, whether it was the ambassador or the DCM or the PAO or the IO, that didn't like the idea for just the reason that was implicit in your question. “Why can't they just send guidance to the post, we've got people who are in touch with all these people.”

There were some reasons for that. For one thing, we were dealing with the journalists who, for NATO ministerials and other big events, NATO would come in from the capital. So, we did have a relationship with them. I didn't see Michel Tatu only in Paris; I saw him in Brussels. But when I was hitting him was the times between ministerials.

It was a question of personalities because there wasn't a real — there wasn't an SOP on all of this. I remember the first couple of missions in London in which I was really under wraps. I wasn't about to go wandering around Fleet Street. They had a few journalists in. We met in the embassy. The PAO and the IO were there.

It was not our immediate colleagues; the fault there was the DCM, a guy who later became my good friend. But he used the word “cowboy” and he really didn't like the idea of what I was doing. He was a very straitlaced State type and this just was outside procedures.

In some cases it would be Ellsworth talking to the ambassador and working it out. But it required tact, developing friendships. I didn't know a lot of people.

But you raised the right question. It was rocky sometimes because I got the cold shoulder in some places. In the end, it worked fine. We cooperated. We fed them material, we gave them the wherewithal so that they were good sources too.

Q: To what degree did you get feedback from your USIA colleagues in other countries? “Look, if you're talking about this substance on NATO in this particular country, that is the angle, that is the way —”

BURNETT: Regularly, and we wouldn't start at any place without every — I developed a standard procedure that unless I could meet with the PAO or the IO at the beginning, I wouldn't do a thing. If their journalists were coming into Brussels, we'd talk to the post first. We helped them shape the angle. Burnett Persuades USIS Posts to Accept His Role Because He was Bringing Policy Information Directly From Highly Knowledgeable Sources (US Ambassadors at NATO) So Valuable to Country Post PAOs and PAOs that They Could Inform Journalists and not Simply be Clerks Themselves Setting Up Appointments with Ambassadors

But there was one compelling argument for all of this that I used. That was the question of whether or not the USIS officer in situations like that — heavy policy, important

substance — is going to be a highly paid appointments clerk or is going to be an important substantive source himself. Would we get so on top of the subjects and would we have enough elbow room from our missions that the journalists wouldn't come to us just because they wanted an appointment with the ambassador — they'd come to us to talk policy.

I, for one — and I'm sure and most of our colleagues here — I didn't want to be a highly-paid appointments secretary. As our people in the different posts around Europe saw that by working with us they could move into those roles too and we could help them play that role, I think they saw it to their professional advantage.

But that was the game and I think if any relenting — if we hadn't pushed — it wasn't that people were falling all over themselves asking us to do this job — we were pushing to do this job. Had we not, we would have been appointment clerks because our political sections and our DCM and ambassadors' offices were generally filled by people who thought they were entirely adequate to talk to the European media themselves if only the USIS guy sets up the appointments and writes maybe a few talking points.

Q: Let me take you back to this because what you say is so important because you may remember there was a whole era in USIA when USIA officers were expected to be "impresarios" but not substantive people, —

BURNETT: Absolutely.

Q: — which drove a lot of us crazy and made us frustrated. Were you at that point swimming against the stream of the Agency or was this already kind of veering away? How did that work? I mean, what is your recollection of that part?

BURNETT: Pat, your knowledge of history is better than mine — maybe there were two such periods because the period that you described was the Carter period for me. That's when I got those kinds of orders. I rankled the same way you did. It's terribly important

about that period because I have since learned a great deal more about that period and what went into those orders, and I've seen John Reinhardt since.

I, for one, until very recently misunderstood that period and what went on. Let me hurry on through this and get to that period quickly.

Anyway, that was this wonderful five years at NATO in which I thought I couldn't have had a better job because I was dealing with the direct meat of politics every day. Also, you notice, in the NATO mission they didn't have any important programs to run and we didn't have — the amount of bureaucratic stuff we had to do was so minimal that at ministerials we still — the bane of — we were supposed to be substantive officers, we were supposed to be the front-line advocates and we were still the guys who had to arrange buses and all that crap every time there was an important visit.

But outside of that, these were wonderful days. The fact that they were, I think, is a tribute to the intelligence and the good conception of what we should be doing that people like Bill Hamilton and George Vest and Ellsworth and Rumsfeld had.

1974: Burnett Overcomes a Scheduled Washington Assignment to Become Deputy PAO, Rome — and How it Came About

I finally ran out my string there. Remember, now, I had not spent, as I recall, a full working day in Washington in USIA, even getting oriented. So, of course, I had to come home at that point, according to all orders.

But, as I mentioned, I used to go down to Madrid regularly to speak. The PAO in Madrid at that time was Bob Amerson. One night I went down and was speaking — we had a particularly hot session at his center at which I was the guest speaker, and we had all those generals lined up in the first three rows asking why aren't you guys letting us into NATO.

At that point I would have to explain the dynamics and talk about the fact that even if the US were to get behind it in some high level way, that there were a lot of Scandinavian countries that really couldn't hack it, having the Spaniards in. We'd tell them some home truths. Then, of course, the students were in the back of the room. It was a hot session but a real good one.

Bob was a very gracious host always. He and Nancy — I brought my wife along, which was unusual — I almost never did, but she had never been to Madrid and so I brought her along. So we all went out, hit some bars and listened to some music. At about 3:00 in the morning we wound up in the Plaza Mayor, or whatever it's called, the big central square in Madrid. This will recall the good old days when assignments were made in ways that would probably bring legal action now.

Bob said, “I got wonderful news today.” I said, “What was it?” He said, “I've just been assigned PAO to Rome.” I said, “You're the luckiest man in the world.” I had worked in Rome as a professor — I had worked there for NBC and I loved Rome. I spent a lot of time there.

I said, “You're the luckiest guy in the world. I can't imagine anything nicer.” I said, “I'm doomed. They've made clear that I have to go back to Washington now. We're reaching the legal limit of my being out.” He said, “Are you really interested in coming to Rome?” I said, “Yeah.”

He said, “How is your Italian?” I said, “My Italian is beautiful,” which was a lie. I had wonderful 16th century Italian because I had written a couple of books on Machiavelli. Modern Italian I couldn't handle at all, but I'm afraid I didn't make that distinction too carefully with Bob.

He said, “You know, we need a cultural attach# and you've got all the credentials.” You know, a doctorate with a book on Machiavelli. What could be more perfect. He said,

“Would you like to come to Rome as my CAO?” The other guy was ending his tour — Bill — I'm sorry, I don't remember his name. Bill Braun — B-r-a-u-n.

I said, “Absolutely. If you can swing it, I'm your man.” Gee, it must have been two days later that I got a call from the Agency that said, “How would you like to go to Rome as the CAO?” I said, “I'm practically packed.” (Laughter.)

BURNETT: It was because of that early morning coffee in Plaza Mayor with Bob Amerson that we did that.

In the interim, then, they lost their Deputy PAO, Jim McDonald. Jim McDonald decided to retire and it was earlier than — he surprised people by deciding to retire. So Bob said, “I know you have your heart set on being CAO. Would you like to move up a notch? Would you like to be the Deputy PAO?” I said, “What the heck. That sounds terrific.”

Remember, I had served — the only country post I had served at was Kinshasa during this semi-wartime and NATO, which is no kind of normal post. I still didn't know anything about post operations, I still didn't know what a going rate was and I had never been oriented.

Assignment Coincided with the Possible “Historic Compromise” of a Communist and Christian Democrat Coalition to Rule Italy

So, I took the job and it was a direct transfer again so I had escaped Washington still. I went down and had four — I just had the luckiest possible career. I had four years as Bob Amerson's and then Jock Shirley's Deputy PAO in Rome at a terrific time to be there because it was right at the time when the US was worried about the spread of the Italian Communist Party.

It was the time when the Compromesso Storico, the historic compromise, was on everybody's mind. The idea that the Communists and the Christian Democrats would

cut a deal, not for a coalition of the left to rule Italy, but the two big parties. The model, of course, was the German Grand Coalition, which went and came left and right —

Q: Right.

BURNETT: — would govern Italy. US policy, of course, was to oppose it, although we were so delicate about saying it that we almost faded into the woodwork.

So, it was an excellent time to be there because of the political struggle that was involved. Especially when Jock arrived — but to some extent before — we got well into the political parts of that job.

Now, an important part of Agency history. When I arrived, Italy was one of those places that had been giant after the war and had stripped down. We had, when I arrived, two branch posts, Milan and Naples.

To give you an example, the guy in Naples, who didn't have a car, had nine Italian employees, eight of whom had been with us since the "40s. He was expected to cover all the southern half of the boot, including driving over to the east coast, Puglia and so forth. I don't know, I guess he used his own car when he did it.

A Time Magazine Map Clinches Post's Argument for Expanding Field Posts in Italy

For example, he'd visit Bari — now, Bari had, as little as seven or eight years before I arrived, four Americans and 14 Italians — Bari! Now you had a guy driving his own car out of Naples to do it. Catania had had the same number, four Americans and 14 Italians. Now we didn't have anybody on the entire island of Sicily.

So, one of the things that I was particularly interested in doing, because Bob made the deputy in charge of the branch posts — we were inadequately covering a lot of important

things that had to be done in Italy. It was the first time there was something like a program. We had a country plan that made some sense. It was coherent.

I recall, after all the arguing about it with Washington, that we sent in — it wasn't even a cable, it was a memorandum saying we need a massive expansion of branch posts, justification attached. The attachment was a single page which was a Xerox of Time Magazine — a little before and after map in which they showed where the Italian Communist Party had been two years ago and then their expansion in terms of local government in two years. This ink blot was spreading across Italy.

The suggestion was, you take that up to the Congress, you take it to the White House. That's reason enough.

What we got was the reopening of four additional branch posts. We reopened Trieste, we reopened Genoa, we reopened Florence, and we reopened Palermo on the basis of those two maps showing the ink blot because that was the one thing that had some real political meaning.

Q: That was under the heading of fighting Communism.

BURNETT: Absolutely.

Q: Right.

BURNETT: I'm not sure we at USIS even saw that as necessarily the most important part of our mission, but it was our vehicle for getting the things we needed. The educational and cultural program was below bare bones. Our resources were too limited to do anything in a decentralized country like Italy, the kind of job we should be doing.

In some of those cities we still had what were called “sub-posts,” in that an Italian employee was hanging on, keeping an office open, and that was all. We moved Americans into those places.

It was wonderful. It was so good. We've all spent so much of our lives cutting back that it was so nice to be in on an expansion like that.

Q: What year was that, Stan?

BURNETT: That must have been — the watermark for the Compromesso Storico was '76, so this must have been '75, '76 — in that period. We geared up and we started writing, I thought, healthier programs. We had ambassadors who simply gave us a lot of elbow room without being very understanding or effective themselves.

John Volpe, the former Governor or Massachusetts and Secretary of Transportation — a wonderful man with whom I'm still in touch — pretty much let us have our head.

He was succeeded by Dick Gardner who had more ideas and ambitions himself about that. But, for a lot of reasons that aren't of interest here, there was a rocky relationship between the post and Gardner even through his successive PAOs. I wound up being much later PAO under Gardner also and the relationship stayed rocky. Although, once again, there's a good personal relationship. He's on my board here at the Center now.

Q: What was the thrust of the program? What did it try to accomplish?

Bifurcation of USIA/Italy Program

BURNETT: Well, the program was almost perfectly bifurcated in a way that I came not to like. That is, there was no particular relationship between the so-called information program and the so-called cultural program.

The cultural program was devoted to carrying out the usual activities; Dick Arndt was CAO. He had a bad first year and a bad fourth year, but the second and third years, when we really got it together, saw the best performance by a CAO I ever saw, by Dick Arndt.

Dick Arndt and Lois Roth were there. Lois was the Program Officer. I remember we were averaging more than a program event a day just in Rome. We had months under Lois where we had more than 100 program events in Italy in the month. It was a fireworks show.

Major Thrust of Cultural Programs was Countering Communists' Complete Domination of High School and College Instruction

There was a thrust and that really had to do with the campuses. In the secondary schools and in the universities the Communists had taken over the faculties. The Christian Democrats had decided after the war that they were going to take all the “important” jobs, which meant industry and finance. They'd leave stuff like education and so forth to those other folks.

The result was, as you might expect, a strong anti- American left. The Communists and that part of the Socialist Party which were called Maximalists, even more anti-American than the Communists, had taken over education. They had rewritten the history books. A generation of Italians was being formed with the hardest kind of party-line propaganda passing for teaching about the United States.

So, finding wedges into American studies programs, working on textbooks, that in many ways I think was the most important thing we were doing. Dick was brilliant at it. We were behind him. I think we made honest men and women out of a lot of teachers and faculty.

Q: Did you forge any bridges between US and Italian universities? I mean, the usual attempts of —

BURNETT: Yes, there were some. It got started during my period. I remember the first one was between Northeastern University and the University of Reggio, Calabria. I still remember that because I poured champagne. It was a tough thing because it was a rather unpopular and difficult thing for Italian universities to do.

The fact is that the south is much more conservative than the north, for reasons that have to do with World War II and The Resistance. So it was easier to do it there initially. We did, and it was important, but progress was slow. It wasn't going to happen all at once. We worked at that, and that was important.

We worked to get the Fulbright, and failed during that period — we succeeded later — to get the Fulbright program and the International Visitor program improved. The Fulbright program needed some direction, some point. For example, it needed not to be dominated by the physical sciences so that it would have a stronger flow of social sciences and humanities.In the IV program, we needed, and we did not succeed at that point, to recapture from the embassy log-rolling and pork barrel approach, where the agricultural attach# got his and 16th Street got theirs and there were a bunch of rewards. These were the goodies to be passed out to their main contacts — all the wrong uses of the IV program. We did not succeed at that time in recapturing it. Later we found the key. When I returned as PAO, I managed to abolish the mission grants committee, and put the whole program on the PAO's desk for decisions, all according to country plan objectives. The labor attach#, for example, merely “advised” the PAO.

Anyway, four great years and very different years because Bob Amerson and Jock Shirley — you had a cultural affairs oriented PAO replaced by a very political and information program oriented PAO. But we made it all work.

Pat, let me add one note that I think is important. Rome, I think, through that period and prior to it and afterwards, has been not a bad post, one that worked fairly well. It was relatively tranquil as officers did their job. As compared to some other posts in Europe,

some of the big ones that have been characterized for 20 years by turmoil and difficulties and failure sometimes to get their act together.

In Europe, Country Programs Headed by Strong, Capable Information-Oriented PAO are the Most Effective

You can go through Europe, which is the area I know best — and when I was area director I looked hard at this — and find the ones that are functioning well and functioning poorly. I do think that there is one general point to be made about them.

Where the PAO plays a strong information role — and I'll come back to this — where he is handling that whole range of top publishers, editors and columnists who really think they're a little bit above talking to an IO or press attach#, but whom the ambassador can't see all the time or isn't interested in or doesn't have the language for or isn't very good at, where he does that and lets a very senior CAO have his wings and take the spotlight — and here you start with the phenomenon that Europeans, as do people mostly around the country, know what a cultural attach# is and they don't know what the hell a PAO is, that's a term nobody else uses — let him have the spotlight and his wings, I think you have our most effective posts — this is a very narrow statement, I'm talking large posts in very sophisticated countries and the CAO should have academic credentials and, as I say, he should be allowed the spotlight.

When PAO Invades Cultural Area and Shirks Informational Role, There is Trouble

Where the PAO has a thirst to be the main cultural figure in town, with a lower grade CAO, he doesn't fill that information role that I just talked about, I think those posts have been beset by difficulties.

You said no holds barred. I think it is not coincidence that you had a struggle between — speaking here of all very good friends or late lamented friends of mine — the difficulty between PAO Jack Hedges and CAO Dick Arent in Paris is because Paris was organized

in that latter way. In fact, they had lost the press attach# entirely. He didn't even sit at USIS. He was a complete captive of the ambassador over at the embassy, as you know.

It was repeated almost word for word then later, in struggles between — sorry, now we're talking about serving officers — Sam Courtney and Kenton Keith. They were in the same roles. We're talking across the board about very good officers. I think that — and I'll come to it later because we got into some inspection trouble on it — you hate to generalize too much but I think there's a fundamental lesson there. I'll come back to it.

Four years in Rome with Art and Roth and such terrific people working on the information side as Chuck Loveridge, some great branch PAOs that we moved in and who did terrific jobs, people like Miller Crouch — those were wonderful years in which we were a part of important political action, we had an important cultural mission, and we had a lot of officers and a lot of talent.

Relative Effectiveness of Centralized vs. Decentralized USIS Country Program Depends on the Country: Great Flexibility Necessary

Q: I need to interrupt you for one thing here because you made the point, which I think is very important, that you reopened branch posts. You also said — and that was still referring to Italy — that it was a decentralized country.

It raises the question that came up in the Agency, as you remember, the Japanese model — you do everything from a central point, you fan out the programs, —

BURNETT: Right.

Q: — you kind of put them into place in the central place and then send them out to the boonies or the branch posts.

BURNETT: Yes.

Q: Forgive my saying that. Now, the whole philosophy of centralized versus decentralized administration of a major country plan, where do you stand? What has been your experience with that?

BURNETT: Well, my experience — and it comes up later on things like, for example, the INF deployment incident — this is not a good answer to your question — is that we need to have enormous flexibility not only on individual programs but in the way we organize ourselves country by country.

Any rigid model is going to be wrong for a lot of countries. I think there is a difference between Italy and France. I don't know of a serious journalist, scholar or artist — particularly performing artist — who is French who does not want to get into Paris. The idea of being important in the French cultural or media and political scene and staying in a regional capital is unthinkable to a Frenchman.

In Italy or in Germany, the capital is not the center of everything. Milan is a more important business center and publications center than Rome is. Bonn comes first in government, and that's about it. Germany —

Q: Really?

BURNETT: That's right. The UK is probably more like France in that. I don't know enough about Japan to comment. But commenting on the European posts, the worst thing we could have is a rigid model. You could then talk about which rigid model is best, but they're all — there you're talking about the best of bad situations.

I think we need that kind of flexibility. An across- the-board order to cut back on branch posts could be a wise and cost-effective thing in some countries and disaster in others. That's hard; it's hard for the Congress; it's hard for the Administration to deal with. But

we need to have the same variety and style of operation as do the countries in which we operate.

Q: The reason that I brought this up, Stan, is that there was a tendency at one time in USIA to use the Japanese model where you had computerized programs, you had your audience research analysis all computerized — these are the audiences that you try to reach. You use it and produce programs centrally.

You try to transpose this from a country where apparently it had been quite successful [in actual fact, although, because of the dominance of Tokyo as a media and governmental center, the Japan program has to be greatly centralized; the computerized audience centralization was not ultimately successful and has been largely abandoned] — in Japan — all of a sudden to the European countries. My experience has been, especially in Germany where I saw it happen, disastrous, where you had a decentralized country, just as you mentioned.

BURNETT: Now, I have to admit that certain things I did centralize later. I centralized, for example, our audience records system. Computers and telephones and modems reached the stage where we needed one full-time Italian employee and one half-time American running the thing because it was big.

I took it very seriously. It was a sensible way to operate. We had to know our audiences that well and it had to have good feedback, and it made perfect sense to do it centrally. I made sure our branch posts could ask a question of the system and get an answer back in 15 minutes.

It had to be as though it were on the ground with the branch PAO. If you could create a situation where it was as though it were on the ground with him, then I saw nothing wrong with doing that.

Packaging programs — I wound up, when I went back to Rome as PAO, caring less and less about packaged programs, frankly. But if the primary job of the USIA officer — and when I had a chance in Italy and then as area director and then as the counselor, I tried to make it in our work requirements the first item is personal advocacy. That you can't centralize.

If we are the on-the-ground civilized effective advocates of US policy, long and short — and I also mean the long-range understanding of the US. You can't centralize that. The guy has to be in Milan; he has to be in Trieste; he has to be in Palermo. Then, not only that, he has to do his homework assiduously.

I remember watching Miller Crouch in action in Sicily discussing Sicilian agriculture. It was clear that Miller had read several books and important recent articles on Sicilian agriculture. We had nothing in our country plan that had anything to do with agriculture. But by being on top of that and all other critical subjects about Sicily, having done his homework — and I would imagine it was painful for him because I don't think he was interested in Sicilian agriculture — he became a part of their world.

He became the kind of interlocutor who was as close to being an insider as an outsider could be. His knowledge of Sicilian agriculture made a difference when he talked to them about deploying missiles in Comiso because of the character of the relationship. We're outsiders, we stay outsiders. But you can be an outsider that they think of as so much a part of their world, so on top of things, and there doing your homework is crucial.

That is the most decentralized possible view of what our work is. So I agree with you, there are certain things that it's efficient to centralize and they tend to be the least important things.

Q: The mechanical aspects of our work.

BURNETT: That's right.

Q: The Deputy PAO in Rome.

BURNETT: Then I went back to Washington — and this was an important part of Agency history. I had gotten to know Charlie Bray a little bit when he was State Department spokesman and I was doing my old NATO job because at times I was the interface with the State Department and White House press spokesmen because I was acting as spokesman for the mission for ministerials and things like that.

So, that way I got to know Bob McCloskey and Charlie Bray and later a lot of people who went through. I got to know Bray a little bit. It was mostly, I remember, the ministerial at Copenhagen.

1978: End of BPAO Rome Assignment, Burnett Called Back to Washington for Work in Office of Agency Deputy Director, Charles Bray

I thought highly of him and I think for those few days he at least remembered me. So I got a rocket to come back — I had to leave post a couple of months early for this supposedly “terribly important job” in Charlie Bray's office. I was to move right into the Deputy Director's office of USIA and the job would be explained to me when I got back. So, I packed a little early and I went back.

I forget what job I had been headed for. Remember, this was the first time I'd really — outside of those week-long consultations — that I had set foot seriously in Washington. I got moved in with Ted Liu. We shared an office outside Charlie Bray's office there in the Director's suite.

My job was that I was supposed to reform and then manage our interface with State and the White House. The feeling was that the relationship wasn't good and they needed a person just focusing on that. Remember, I was totally new in Washington.

Burnett Concludes, After Short Survey, That Job He Was Being Asked to Assume in Deputy Director's Office Could Better Be Handled by a Restructured Research Office, so — He Becomes Director of Research

So, what you do then is go talk to a lot of old friends and get the lay of the land. I'd been there about a week when I asked to see Charlie. I went in and said, “Charlie, I have to tell you I don't think there's a job here. I could write you a memo — I have some ideas about how this should be done — the most important idea is that it should be done by the normal organs of the Agency, not some special office or person. But, you're right, there is some reform needed to make that work and I'd like to write you a memo and then go find something else to do.”

I remember Bray didn't like that initially. He was very unhappy. Obviously, I hadn't gotten the idea if I didn't that it was an important job to do. But he told me to go ahead and write my memo and then he'd see about it.

So, I wrote a little bit of a memo. It talked about how you could beef up the relationships, how you would do it between area offices and assistant secretaries, and a few things like that.

I put special emphasis on the Office of Research. I said that this office has the ability — it isn't doing it now — but it has the ability to produce a constant flow of info about overseas attitudes. That for all the reporting going on from press and media and out of conversations by our posts and by State, we would know something about foreign attitudes and would know it in a way that nobody else knew it.

It would be unique and it would be critical to the advisory function that the director has vis-a-vis the President and the NSC and the Department of State. I thought it was possible to take an office like that, change what its goals were and make it the key element in that relationship.

This was an office, — by the way, they had just had a report by one of the media whizzes around here — I forget who it was — analyzing our research operation. A big private media whiz — we paid a lot for the report. It said either do away with the Office of Research or have it analyze our products in a very Madison Avenue way. Those were the roles — it was junk, frankly. But it was expensive junk.

Director Reinhardt allowed as how he was really thinking that maybe there wasn't a role for the Office of Research — or, if there was, maybe if these media moguls said this was how you should do it, maybe we should have a go.

So, my memo was completely out of harmony with all of this. I think that Charlie saw a glimmer of an idea and sort of sold John, got him reluctantly on board. Or maybe it was the other way around. I shouldn't use first names, really, because I wasn't that close to either of them.

They decided, since it was a job that no serious officer wanted anyway — it was a backwater — to make me Director of Research, to take my memo, since I clearly didn't want to do the job in Charlie's office, and see if there was anything in what I said. That was the deal.

Then, about two hours later, I was told to take this report very seriously by the media moguls. What was his name? It would ring bells. It's one of the big names in survey research and advertising and all.

It sounded like fun. I didn't know what it was. I really believed that there was a role for research. So, I took it over. It meant taking the Agency library too, which was hooked on for some reason. I reported to the P Bureau, which meant I reported to Alan Carter who reported to Hal Schneidman who reported to Charlie Bray who reported to John Reinhardt, and that's important.

Q: Well, that was Research in State, not at USIA?

Research Office Found to be Moribund —Burnett Reorganizes it and Changes Types of Research Projects

BURNETT: Oh, no. This was USIA. Office of Research. So I took the job and I found this group of civil servants who had stared at each other and the same four walls for so many years that they hated both of them. Entirely disaffected. The average time to get a report out from the time the analyst finished his first draft until the time it came out was 14 or 15 months — more than a year — because there was a Review Board that it had to go through and some of the most disaffected analysts sat on the review board. They'd savage their colleagues.

My dear friend Curt Gorder was probably the worst of them. He would just rip them up. So the stuff never got out of the Review Board. The average length was about 150 pages. You know, there were Executive Summaries, but, still, it was a tome.

The subjects were largely whatever the guys in the Office of Research thought up because the areas and the posts and the management of the Agency weren't taking it all very seriously. We made what I think was the ideal arrangement. Unfortunately, I don't think the Agency has gone back to it. They put an officer who was interested in the politics of the whole game in charge. There was no deputy. They allowed me to hire a deputy and I went around to see the young analysts to see what textbooks they were reading and we went out and got the guy from whom they had all learned survey research.

That was Jerry Hersh-Cesar whose job was not to manage the people and not to do the political end, but to manage the production, to apply all the chi square tests and make sure that we were methodologically sound.

We reorganized from top to bottom, frankly not because I was convinced it needed reorganization, but I thought that everybody were at each other's throats in their old jobs —

you'd better change all the relationships. So, we totally reorganized on a geographic basis. There must have been about a dozen grievances that came out of that. Everybody was ticked off. It worked perfectly.

Carter and Schneidman Sabotaged All Efforts to Redefine Role of Research Office and Produce New Types of Research Products; In Long Run, Burnett's Ideas Prevailed, But Only After Long, Tortuous Period

The projects that we proposed were so far out from what they had in mind that it had to be approved by Alan Carter and Hal Schneidman. They turned down my first dozen. They wouldn't approve them. So here were the guys sitting doing nothing.

Frankly what we started doing using resources — I hope I'm beyond the statute of limitations — we did some of the projects that either we hadn't asked about or that we had been turned down on. The one that they turned down all the way around wound up winning a major award as the outstanding government research —

Q: Can you give us an example?

BURNETT: Sure. I wanted to get in to attitudes on those questions upon which we should be doing public diplomacy. So we were digging into some of the tougher political and image things that made ambassadors nervous. I wasn't interested in looking over the shoulder of our programs and projects — I found all our product research was tainted.

This is a real case. If a guy in Warsaw wanted to keep his library open, he'd get together with the guys in Research and they'd come up with a project and they would show that 2 million people a day, all of them great leaders, poured through the library, and the library would stay open. That's only a slight exaggeration.

We changed a lot of other things. We declassified everything. There would be no classified research. There would be no anonymous research. The guys would sign it. They were encouraged to read papers at conventions and publish from our projects.

We did away with the Review Board and I was the only review, helped by my deputy.

We cut the size from about 150 pages down to no more than two pages. In other words, if they did a major project, they had to pull nuggets out of it. We put them on a blue- striped paper, which I think is still the standard, because I wanted them physically identifiable. We got down so that the average time from the first draft of the analyst to the time they got out became a day and a half.

I mean, we radically changed what research meant. But we got all these disapprovals.

I remember we hit Christmas of that year without a single approved project, even though we were doing some things illicitly. Our office was, I guess, right about Hal's — my outer office. We held a Christmas party. We got Joe Glazer in. We all contributed all our Christmas money to migrant farmworkers in California, which was Joe's cause at that time. Stamping our foot on our floor, which was Hal's ceiling, we sang not carols, but “We Shall Overcome.” We considered ourselves a protest group in the center of the Agency.

Carter/Schneidman Had Concept of the “World Village,” that All Intellectuals Worldwide Had Some Ideas, And Thus Informational Programs Need Not Be Tailored By Country. They Attempted to Bend Research to Prove Their Point. Thus Burnett Proposals Which Interfered Were Quashed

I'm making light of it. It got very bitter and very bad. As you recall, Richard Cohen, a young lawyer, was serving as the special aide to John Reinhardt. I went to him and I said, “Look, I would really appreciate it if the Director would call Carter and Schneidman and me into his office and say I'm really dissatisfied with the way Research is going and I have

some questions to ask about it, and, Richard, I'd appreciate it if you'd have him ask these questions."

I had asked continually for appointments but it had to go through Schneidman and Carter and they wouldn't let me have the appointments. The one time I asked, finally, for lunch with Charlie Bray and thought I was going to get it, Hal and Alan showed up at the lunch too.

Q: In retrospect — I mean, I hope you will discuss what was their hangup.

BURNETT: Well, their hangup was this. Alan had a particular view of, as you know, USIA programming, and particularly how you arrive at the substance of it.

Now, I'll come back to this because later I learned some things about the politics of this period that I never realized. I came to have the greatest sympathy and support for the position (end of tape) A part of this period I am speaking of that I didn't understand until later. Some of what we were trying to do became a little bit controversial.

There was a Washington Post interview — I did an interview with the Washington Post. In it I said some things about the Reinhardt/Bray period.

The failure to understand the requirements of advocacy — I still recall now Jody Lewinsohn, who was European Area Director, trying to clear cables giving some minimal policy guidance to posts at the period when the PAOs were trying to write their country plans and she couldn't get them cleared out of the Agency because we were not supposed to — the substance was supposed to — you remember that was the theory, it was pure sleight of hand — it didn't really work that way — was supposed to come from the posts, which allowed Alan Carter to say that anything that happened in Washington was triggered by the posts, we were entirely at their service.

Well, all that meant was that they took the first step. From then on they got steamrollered. But that was by a lot of theoreticians with some particular ideas. But as happens in a newspaper interview, the careful qualifiers, and so forth, that were in my statement got lopped off and it came out much harder than I had wanted. While the idea was right, I was dismayed by that.

When I saw the Post that morning, I picked up the phone to called Reinhardt, to call Bray. I called each of them and I said, “Look, you've seen the Post. I want you to know that I was partially misquoted. What I said was this — and I wanted you to know.”

Reinhardt in his austere way said that he appreciated my calling, glad to get the right story. It's been only in the last few months that there's been much warmth there, frankly.

But when I called Charlie Bray, he said, “Well, I'm surprised at your call,” he said, “because I thought your statement was absolutely right. I agreed with it from the beginning.” I forget — I think we had lunch together — and he filled me in on some history.

The one thing I always admired John Reinhardt for was his role in the legislative turnaround, taking the Stanton Commission report which would have further Balkanized an Agency that already didn't have domestic cultural and educational affairs — he turned it on its head and we wound up, of course, with CU moving into the Agency. I thought that was a very good move.

But as you know, the American academic community had a lot of trouble swallowing it. Here they were being moved over from the diplomats to the propagandists and they were sure that wouldn't work, that it would somehow cut into the integrity of the educational and cultural affairs program. A lot of things were done to reassure them. The appointment of Alice Ilchman I suppose was partly to reassure them — an important American educator.

But Bray described to me — and I can't go into details because it would break confidence with the conversation — but he described to me a calculated and serious decision to try

to anesthetize that problem for a while by so cranking down the advocacy role, making us so much neutral impresarios providing a platform for a kind of indiscriminate parade of Americans and American ideas to walk across that the educational community would see that we were really harmless.

Schneidman and Carter Were Far Out Theorists Trying to Bend Agency Plans to their Ideas, Regardless of Realities

I had always felt that Schneidman and Carter had captured Reinhardt and Bray. I now have the slightest feeling that to some extent, in a clever way, Reinhardt and Bray used Schneidman and Carter.

They brought in — oh, boy, I feel bad doing this, but I feel the history is important — they brought in some pretty out of control and loony theoreticians, and I think that's what Schneidman and Carter were, and set them loose and they remade the Program Bureau and they built the fancy machine and they produced the situation where a sensible person like Jody Lewinsohn found it impossible to communicate with her posts; they built this Rube Goldberg machine.

I really think that to some extent Reinhardt and Bray sat back and watched it all happen and watched any serious sharp-edged, pointed policy advocacy of which our Agency is very much capable, get totally neutralized by the machine that had been built because I think it played right into their hands.

Bray, I'm confident, was very serious about this and he showed it. Years later when he became Dean of the Foreign Service Institute the first thing he did was to install a whole section on advocacy and how it works.

I think he understood it thoroughly, he believed in it, he would have been perfectly comfortable with that period of time where I think we got back on course. But he

acknowledged to me that they played it exactly the opposite because of the politics of the Congress, the educational community, and so forth.

Now, whether one agrees with that as a tactic, whether one accepts that as a true version that explains what happened in that period, it was an interesting bit of history that I must say, sitting in Washington and all, to the extent that it was true I didn't understand it that way. I was just pained by what was happening. But what it did say to me was that I didn't know everything that was happening.

Q: Well, you know, let me just rejoin one little bit.

BURNETT: Please.

Q: I was not in Washington at the time. Of course, I was in the field when I was PAO in Sweden and in other places. What you said makes sense except it doesn't jibe for me with the character of the two men that you described, either John Reinhardt or Charlie Bray.

I was in the State Department when Charlie Bray was in the P Office there. At that point I thought it wasn't even worthwhile having lunch with Charlie substantively that you couldn't do — because he was so far out in theory that he was devoid of what was the problem, what are you going to say at the noon briefing. You know, away — removed from reality — which is a marvelous luxury that you have when you're in academia but when you're under the pressure of being an advocate of a policy also that has to be sold not only abroad but to the Congress, you know, it seems frustrating.

BURNETT: We're talking personalities and I think that Charlie Bray is a complicated man and I think there's more than one Charlie Bray.

I recognize the man that you're describing and have seen that at meetings. I remember there was a rude cartoonist among our ranks. He used to draw Charlie at meetings with flies and bubbles floating in front of his eyes.

But I also saw, during the same period in P Bureau, Charlie Bray — I thought he was at moments the best spokesman I had seen in State Department. I remember in Copenhagen he had a line that the Secretary had instructed him to use — a set of lines — about the proceedings.

I remember going to him and saying I just came from the French briefing — no, I'm sorry, I said I just came from meeting some friends — the French briefing hadn't taken place — and here's what the French are going to say. Given what they're going to say, you shouldn't say “x”, you should say “y.”

He didn't know me that well and I expected to be — well, I didn't expect, I kind of worried that I might be shunted outside the door as a junior officer with some wild ideas. He said, “How confident are you that you know what the French are going to say?” I said some version of “trust me.” So, he said, “All right. You're right,” and without checking with the Secretary he went out and did what I think was absolutely the right thing to do — preempted the French in a way that really helped the US cause.

It was a neat move and it showed that here was a Charlie Bray with a willingness to act in a very hard way without authority and on the basis of confidence in a junior USIA colleague. Well, as you can imagine, I was rather pleased by that and liked it.

I just think he's a complicated man. While I sympathize with your view and have seen that Charlie Bray, I think there's more than one Charlie Bray.

Let me go on, though, and —

Q: Let me just get one thing straight.

BURNETT: Okay.

Q: Both gentlemanly, never questioning their motive —

BURNETT: Oh, I'm sorry.

Q: I mean, there's no question about that. I think my greatest criticism, if that is what you would call it, is ultimately their performance — the result they obtained on the Hill. I think the way they defended and advocated for the Agency on the Hill was simply ineffectual, and part of the reason for that was that the Agency wasn't doing anything.

So, I leave it at that. I'm sure there are opinions that —

BURNETT: Sure. Outside of the organizational hearings I think you know much more about their Hill performance than I do because I don't know much. I'm just not a good commentator there.

Finally, Reinhardt Calls a Meeting with Schneidman, Carter and Burnett At Which He Supports Burnett, Removes Research from Control of Schneidman and Carter

To return to the story, Reinhardt did call us in and he read from Richard Cohen's notes about what to ask. My point was I was refusing — Carter had given me a firm — Schneidman and Carter — a firm set of things he wanted Research to do. I refused to do them.

Let me tell you what they wanted us to do. You know, they were caught up in all the global village theory. They wanted us to use all the resources of research to prove their theories. Not only was it sort of a waste of resources because we would have been duplicating work done by universities and things like that, but it was dishonest research. They wanted to load the case. They wanted us to engage in — I realize this is a very serious charge but it's correct — in some genuinely fraudulent research.

Q: Into what?

BURNETT: Into the way — into fancy current communications theory. I refused. So they turned down my projects and I was dragging my heels on their projects.

Q: I won't quite let you off the hook yet.

BURNETT: Okay.

Q: Give me a for instance. What would be a project that they would have wanted you to do?

BURNETT: Okay. They wanted to analyze the media habits of the elites throughout the world, social and educational elites, to show that they all lived in one world and that there was no fundamental difference between the educated Ghanaian and the educated Burmese and the educated German, and you could program — you know how this would drill.

Q: Yeah.

BURNETT: This would mean you could write precisely the same program for all of them and get the goddamned African Area Director off our back, let alone the PAO in Accra, from saying this product doesn't work, we need something different for these guys.

We were going to be part of their effort to make uniform worldwide — this is the Japan program now written worldwide — to make all products uniform, and they wanted us to prove it. Well, I refused.

So, we had the meeting and the meeting was designed to show that what they were asking me to do violated the charge that I had gotten initially from Reinhardt and Bray, which was the only leg I had to stand on. Reinhardt was absolutely clear, he couldn't have been better — he said, (to me) “You're right,” and he pointed to Schneidman and Carter and said, “You're all wrong.”

The first thing he did was to remove Research from their control so that it reported directly to the Director's office. Nirvana for me. Perfect.

Carter Retaliates With Devastating Efficiency Rating of Burnett. Soon Carter Moved to Different Job as All Area Director

The only follow-up to that, Pat, is that what was still left was that Carter had to write my OER and he gave me — he checked the lowest box, gave me the lowest rating, and used the word — I think about 15 times in it — “insubordination” and “insubordinate.” Just savaged me.

I remember I wrote a one-line response saying, “This is a perfectly accurate report,” because I had been perfectly insubordinate. I wasn't going to fight it.

We had a screaming match. Carter was then — a few days later — moved to be an area director, moved out of his job. We had a screaming match — no, it wasn't a screaming match because I didn't scream, he did, with half my staff listening at the door in which he accused me of having zapped him and having been partly responsible for the move, which I can assure you I wasn't. I had nothing to do with it. I read it — read the announcement like everybody else. He was convinced that I got into it.

So, anyway, he really savaged me. So I expressed agreement with it and let it go at that. The hell with it. It was a price that I knew I was going to have to pay for what I was doing.

Some years later when Jock arrived in Rome — no, when I arrived in Rome and Jock was there — no, I've got that wrong. When Jock left Rome and went back home and I was in Rome as his successor, he called me and said, “I've just found your file and saw it and there's this thing from Carter in there. You've got to grieve it.” I said, “Jock, you know, I'm not litigious like that.” It was calculated — I knew I was going to pay that price. If the

people in the promotion panels don't know Alan Carter and can't understand it, then the hell with it. I'm not going to go to that bother.

Anyway, he insisted. You know, go to the Agency. He said, “There's a whole army of grievances now against Carter and you've got to join them. It will help all the others.” So, I joined and a while later got notice that I'd won the grievance and the OER was thrown out. Anyway, it was a tough conflict.

Thereafter, Research Freed to do Meaningful Studies Which Gained White House Attention

From then on all of our projects were approved, we got in the right people, and we had a wonderful — oh, I guess it was about 14 months — in which weekly — weekly at least — we got back blue-stripers with margin notes in the hand of Jimmy Carter and in the hand of Brzezinski.

We were on the map and we set a standard — my five branch chiefs for each of the branches of research — that either they or the area director were regular attendees and asked to brief in the staff meetings of the Assistant Secretaries for those regions. That's the standard they should shoot for; they should be that politically relevant.

I think in three out of five we got there, where there were regular briefings of the material from Research in the staff meetings of the Assistant Secretaries for those regions because that's what we were shooting for.

Q: You know, I can testify to the accuracy because I was then Director of Public Affairs in the Latin American Bureau.

BURNETT: That's right, you were.

Q: I joined the Panama negotiations and I know that the Latin American Area Director, an office that I had left to go over to State, was there during the staff meetings with the Assistant Secretary and did brief and had his input.

BURNETT: Pat, it's not a personal story. The importance of that to the Agency is my continued conviction, first, that our work must be unclassified — because we didn't have that big a budget. Nine-tenths of what we got we acquired by tradeoffs with other research outfits, which you can't do if it's classified.

Second, we didn't need all those review boards because our analysts were on the line with signed documents. they had their professional standing behind them, a concept they hadn't thought of for 20 years in some cases.

The point is, I think, that the Director of Research should be an officer, an officer who wants that kind of policy input on the part of the Agency in the advisory function.Right under him should be some seasoned survey research professionals because it will be rare that we have a supervising officer with the proper credentials and academic background. I happen to have a little but it was coincidence. But I don't think that's important. So, beneath him there can be some professionals.

But I think we must go back to the model where there is an officer there, and I think if we make it count for enough it will be a job that people want rather than run away from.

I had two years in Washington and then, as you —

Q: Turbulent would be —

BURNETT: Turbulent. In the end very satisfying. Boy, I loved that last year and two months. We got awards for our people. We got promotions for our people. And we got rid of the deadwood. The really bad deadwood, frankly, couldn't keep up. We had a number

of analysts leave, and they were the ones who should have left. They didn't leave because we threw them out, they left because they couldn't keep up. We were expecting too much.

1980: After Two Years as Head of Research, Burnett Returns to Rome as PAO

Then Jock came back from being PAO in Rome to be Acting Director of the Agency during the — between Administrations. They needed somebody to get to Rome fast who had the language and all the background and all. Because I'm a very loyal soldier and will do absolutely anything for the Agency and the good of the country, when Terry Catherman, who was the Area Director — I remember he even decided he had to have a walk with me and we walked out, around and about the Agency.

Q: I'm glad he didn't jog you.

BURNETT: That's right. Oh, Terry and I have jogged together. You're right. He said, “Gee, I know this is your only tour and you've just got home, it would seem,” and so forth, “but we really need for you to go out in the field. Would you consider?” You can imagine how long it took me to say yes.

I hated to leave the Research job because I firmly believe — and I think it's been proven, frankly — that you can reform something in Washington but unless you stay around then for several years, build expectations, build the right people in, the reforms aren't going to stick. I think that's the case. I think you —

Q: You have to institutionalize reforms —

BURNETT: That's right.

Q: — before they stick.

BURNETT: And I didn't stay long enough. They tried other formulas after it.

So I headed back to Rome.

I am going to have to be briefer and, Pat, if we need a few extra minutes, we can.

Back out to Rome where I had just left. They say you can never go home again, and it's too quick and you shouldn't do it, but gee I had sat there in the deputy's job looking across the hall and thinking that the guy across the hall was having all the fun while I was doing the work. You know, I was right.

Using Extensive Personal Contact Advocacy Backed Up by Access to Accurate, Persuasive Information, USIS Under Burnett's Direction Made Significant Impact on Italian Media and Opinion

I had two terrific deputies during that time. One was Barry Fulton and the other was Robert Bemis, and they could run the things. So I had a glorious tour as PAO in which I was out almost all the time.

I did have that view of my role as — well, we had an inspection that loved the post and the only thing they were critical of in what was a terrific inspection during that time was the PAO. They criticized me. They said I was behaving like a super-IO. I had to admit that's exactly what I was doing.

I was spending a heavy part of my time — they gave us such wonderful representation digs, I thought I would use it. I would have a lunch every day — not every other day — every day. I mean, I'd get paid back — sometimes I'd be the guest. But at least three times a week I was the host — do to business. Got to know intimately all the editors, all the important news commentators, all the columnists, without exception.

It was wonderful for me because, God, this was glory. These guys whom I had read for years, who were heroes — Alberto Ronchey and Indro Montanelli — to be able to deal with them every day was wonderful.

During that time also we upgraded our contact with the Italian Communist Party. I was the only old Italian hand in the embassy. The Embassy had very weak economic and political sections in terms of background in Italy. So I became also the point man for the embassy for all the contacts with the top levels of the Italian Communist Party. So I was having lunch with the Secretary General and all the brass regularly too and doing the political reporting. You can imagine what fun that was.

It was a terrific time. I had a terrific information section, some of the best people in the world working there for me. We had a Super-CAO for the first year and then went to Agency officers, which meant that there was some rebuilding to do because Super-CAOs usually don't take care of the institutional business too well. But he did a lot of good for us because he (the Super) was the key to acquaintance with a lot of people. So, in the end we came out okay for it.

I was only there for three years, not a full four, but it was a sensational three years. I don't think I've ever had that much fun in my professional life — at least, not until now.

We had a very hard-edged program. We saw ourselves as front-line advocates for the most important issues happening in Italy. I had 45 minutes alone with the ambassador every morning, a contact with him that even the DCM didn't have.

It was during the time of the missile deployment. But that was just one — that was the only one that was Europe-wide, but that was one of the hard-edged efforts.

We got to the place where I was writing work requirements for the guy in Palermo saying one of his jobs was to turn the Giornale Di Sicilia around. They have this position on this issue, turn them around.

Now, to do that you have to have mutual confidence and trust because that guy has to know that he might come back to you and say, “I'm having trouble and the reason I'm having trouble is, he's a party hack and he takes his orders from the Socialist Party so

you've got to do your job in Rome." It's got to be reasonable, and if I can't produce, then I can't expect him to produce and so forth.

Some of the officers were frightfully unhappy at having that kind of edge. The guy in Florence even grieved it. The officers that I thought were the best were the officers that loved it. You should talk especially to Dino Catarini.

Q: Oh, yes.

BURNETT: Dino was my guy in Milan and he was really ticked off initially. This is impossible, we can't work with this. He came — he told me later — I hope he was telling the truth — that it wound up as the most satisfying period in his professional life because if you give proper support we can have that kind of hard edge. We don't have to report just activities, we can report accomplishments.

We went through a long period in which the cant that I remember was drilled into me — you can't really change minds — you know, you can deliver information and so forth, but let's not have the hubris to suggest that we can actually influence. If we don't have that hubris, if we don't seek to do it, I think the game is terrifically uninteresting and I can't imagine why the Congress would fund it.

I think we should accept that challenge. It means a very civilized idea of persuasion. We must take seriously the intelligence and the ability of your interlocutor to decide. The INF deployment, if we hit a guy who didn't believe the missiles worked, we fed him all the technical information he could swallow, we tried to get him to a test firing, we did what we could. If we felt we weren't negotiating seriously in Geneva and he was an important person, then we got him together with Paul Nitze or with Rostow, whether in Geneva or in Rome. We took it very seriously.

I think that perceived that way it's a noble trade, it's the most exciting game in town, and it's not hubris. It's exactly what we should charge ourselves with and it's damned hard.

One of the reasons why it's not a good idea to do that is that if Congress ever gets the idea that you can actually be that precise about what our work is, we might have difficulties sometime in showing our level of accomplishment for a particular period. But I think that's a small fear.

We do deal in soft things sometimes, you can't show a direct cause and effect. We could work hard during an election campaign in a foreign country and the election campaign comes out a particular way and we can't claim what we affected. But we can be a lot harder and have a lot more evidence of effectiveness than we usually use.

Q: To underline what you said, I honestly think that what happened in Eastern Europe very recently is the accumulated result of what I call radio and television sequence.

BURNETT: All right, I agree with you, but let me add to that.

Q: It's not only, but —BURNETT: Pat, if you go back to the late "70s, that electrician and union leader knew one American and knew him well and got materials from him — the one American that Lech Walesa knew was John Kordek.

Q: Oh, I would say that is the first line of the —

BURNETT: Absolutely.

Q: Absolutely. You know, but I'm saying —

BURNETT: John Kordek is a man who perfectly understood this advocacy role.

Q: Oh, absolutely. I would say this is number one.

BURNETT: Yeah.

Q: I have no quarrel with this and I agree with you one hundred percent. It's the cumulative effect of breaking out of isolation for more than one person. In the final analysis, it's a one-to-one relationship.

BURNETT: Your point is well-taken.

Q: Since you are in a rush, can we move to the counselor assignment?

1983: Burnett Leaves Rome a Year Early — Spends One Year as Counselor to Ambassador Abshire at NATO, Then Returns to Washington (1984) as Director of European Office

BURNETT: Yes. There was a brief interregnum there. When Dave Abshire went to NATO he asked me to come in as his counselor. It meant leaving Rome a year early, and it meant going from a job that some people perceived as higher to one that some people perceived as not that high. I don't think of the NATO job that way. I think the NATO job is as important as any in Europe.

I thought that doing the job at NATO, leaving the embassy in good hands, which was easy to do, was more important than the questions of up or down. So I accepted and went to NATO for — I was only there for a year. Once again, an excellent year.

By this time, of course, I was even more full of my own theories. I remember the DCM remarking that the most military man in the place in terms of the way he laid out marching orders and goals and then accomplished them was not the defense establishment, it was down in the USIS office. So I had a good year at NATO, and maybe if you want to come back to it, we can talk about it.

Charlie Wick then called the ambassador and said that he wanted me to come back as European Area Director. It was a three-day weekend — I forget for what holiday — and the

two of them, with me sitting in my ambassador's living room, were on the phone through most of that as they argued.

In the end — and it sort of came to that — Charlie Wick was able to say, “Look, these are my troops and I will deploy them,” and had the trump hand. They sent a very good man to replace me, Vic Olason. So I came back as European Area Director.

A great job, even though you had to do a lot of travel with the Director, which was a drawback but not a painful one. I was always personally very comfortable with Wick. Substantively we never had great problems, but personally very comfortable, and there was never personally a cross word between us. I came from all those years of association with him not only unscathed but feeling good. He still shows up at my office here when he's in Washington.

Q: Well, in that sense he was always a gentleman.

BURNETT: Yeah, he was.

Q: I mean, in personal relationships.

BURNETT: He could be savage with some people but in most cases they were people that weren't playing straight with him in some way or another. So I served as European Area Director with great colleagues and a lot of fun. We did have such fun.

The “Clandestine” European Area PAO Meeting

I remember we held a couple of clandestine — if you can imagine such a thing — PAO conferences because in those times a PAO conference with Charlie Wick and Al Snyder and so forth — you'd lost control. It was Washington talking to the field and nothing could get done, and God forbid you should ever discuss the substance of policy and what our goals were.

So I remember one night I had traveled with Wick and then he went home to Washington and I stayed behind for a couple of days saying I needed some rest. On Sunday night, as it happened, 14 major PAOs including Ray Benson from Moscow showed up at the same Belgian restaurant. We had a great meal and the next day we all huddled in the USEC office, 14 PAOs and the guy that we made an honorary PAO, George Vest, who was the ambassador there.

Q: Yes.

BURNETT: We had a session that had — I needed it because I was about to write — I wanted an area plan like a country plan. I wanted substantive objectives for the area to which we'd be held, and I wanted to meet with the guys in the field so that I could write them.

We had a terrific meeting. I remember I had asked Dell Pendergrast to lead off with a survey and he did a brilliant job. A great meeting, about which we never told the Director. It was entirely clandestine. They all took a day's leave.

Gee, it was about six months later — because somebody had slipped — I remember Wick asking me quizzically, “Was there ever a PAO meeting in Europe that I didn't attend?” I probably fibbed at that time. (Laughter.)

Anyway, a good six months. Then Wick decided he wanted to revive the post of counselor. As you recall, the post was created when Jock, who should have been made — should have been made Deputy Director of the Agency — but instead they wanted to put in a political appointee — they needed a golden place for him to land so they created the job of counselor.

I don't know if their intention was just to be nice to Jock. As it turned out, he was terribly effective and important to the Agency. But then when Jock left they brought in Jack Hedges and the mix was not good between Jack and the Director. I believe it lasted five

weeks. It was a terrible shame because they had interrupted Jack's tour in Paris to do it. That had gone so badly that then they just didn't fill the job and there wasn't any counselor.

1985: Wick Restores Position of Agency Counselor and Puts Burnett Into It: Discussion of How it Functions

Wick decided after about six months that he wanted me involved in things beyond Europe and so he recreated — and I asked — there was no deputy director at the time and so I said, “Look, let me do the job temporarily until there is a deputy director. Don't fill the European job because I like that job, and then let me go back to it.”

No, he wanted me to buy on entirely. He insisted on that. As it turned out, the deputy who came in was Marvin Stone with whom I had the best and most collegial relationship and it went great. So, there was never a problem that way. So he made me counselor.

Q: But then what was the function of the counselor?

BURNETT: Okay.

Q: I mean, with area directors, office directors, what was the counselor supposed to do?

BURNETT: Okay. Wick had an idea and I had an idea and they weren't the same ideas so we kind of did them both. Wick wanted somebody — Wick came to realize that he was terribly weak on the substance of policy and in thinking about the strategy to do something about it. And he remained weak. Frankly, he remained kind of uninterested in it. He continually got into trouble because of it so he really wanted somebody close to him to do that part of the job for him.

Working Out Arrangement that Assured USIA Regular Representation at National Security Council Meetings

A good sample of how that came out is that he was very concerned, as you know, to have a seat at the table at the NSC. We didn't have a statutory seat, but it's all right so long as we got a special invitation for every meeting. Not some of the meetings, but every meeting.

The story — we don't have time, Pat, but we could revive it. There was a lot of politicking for us to wind up to get to the place where Bud McFarlane first — but then his successors —created a system wherein not that we would get an invitation to those meetings — and this was NSC and NSPG and RPG, the three big ones — not just that we would get a special invitation but that there would have to be a memo from somewhere in the ranks of the NSC suggesting that we not be invited, and it would take action not to invite us rather than invite us.

Banking on bureaucratic inertia. I figured that was what was necessary. McFarlane bought it first, Poindexter bought it afterwards, Carlucci bought it afterwards, so that in effect we were at every one.

The only time they tried to ace us out was an NSPG on weapons systems. Why do you want those guys? I only had to remind them of the neutron bomb, what happened to the labeling of Star Wars by Kennedy, and so forth, to suggest that we should precisely be at (I never told you my neutron bomb story. I'll have to tell it later) — so, we were in.

But Wick rarely attended. I attended most of them, and he wanted it that way. He attended about half of them that involved the President and none of them that didn't involve the President. Marvin would attend occasionally, but usually I did, and that's what he wanted.

I don't need to tell you that I was delighted by that arrangement and it was good. I saw it as a way, frankly, to try to move further toward getting the Agency away from either the idea that some political appointees would have, but they would never last very long — of a kind of propaganda which would not be our trade, propaganda using the American sense of the term. Manipulative efforts to move audiences. Or, those periods in which we were

seen as mere impresarios. To a definition of civilized advocacy to our point of view, which is where we should be.

Burnett as Counselor is Able to Protect Agency Officers from Wick's Irrational Firings Based on Emotional Flareups

That meant working with area directors and working with the P Bureau and working with the Director. So I had my reasons for wanting the job and he had his reasons. They weren't the same but they weren't disharmonious.

Having said that, you spend a lot of time problem- solving. I think that if you could put notches on a rifle — this is the job, not me, because I'll bet my successors can say precisely the same thing — I would say I got 25 officers a year unfired because Wick would savage all of them. A trip would go wrong and he'd blast everybody, and those included area directors, PAOs and so forth —by solving the problem in a way, by telling him he misunderstood, by saying I'll take care of it and then not taking care of it.

In a couple of cases by saying, “Look, I'll take personal responsibility for their performance henceforth.” Wick pink-slipped more good officers per day than anybody could imagine. They didn't go through — I was not foiling Wick in any way. I want to make that clear.

That was help he needed and it was working to the benefit of the Director. He came, in most cases, to appreciate it. I was not frustrating him. He was a very explosive man and had all those explosions been allowed to take effect, it would have been terrible.

You know, there are occasions when they were — had been allowed to take effect. Simple things. Every trip was a disaster. Every trip would get people fired until I insisted — I was the only one who had good enough access to him. Area directors would say, “I've got to get in to talk about your schedule for your Far Eastern trip,” and he's say, sure, but nobody could ever get in to see him.

But I could walk in. I could get it at any time. Not only for long-range planning but then right before the trip I would take the Area Director and I'd walk in. I didn't care if it was 7:00 at night and Wick had his coat on. I'd say, “You've got to sit down and go over point by point the schedule or you're going to have big trouble. You know you are.” He'd sit down.

So that every time from then on that he flew off he knew that he had personal direct responsibility for every point in the schedule and we didn't have a single guy fired after that. It was as simple as that. You had to do it.

Because anything that went wrong in the old days — I remember one —Q: It was his fault.

BURNETT: Yeah, that's right. He wasn't allowed enough time at Tsukuba Fair in Japan. He wanted to sack both the PAO and the Area Director for that one because they had scheduled him too short. You know, that's unreasonable.

If he knows that those times are his times, he can be ticked off. But he's not that unreasonable a man. Simple things like that, Pat, I know this needs more detail. We've run up against it.

I hate to interrupt it, but at some point we should add a point about the fact that the biggest Washington think tank on international affairs decided that for their substantive officer, their intellectual dean, they wanted not somebody from the Department of State and not somebody from Harvard or Princeton, but a public diplomatist.

The fact that he was a public diplomatist isn't irrelevant to their choice because it has something to do, I think, with the history of our Agency because I don't think I'm unique. I think I'm just the first. I think it's going to happen in other major think tanks. I think it has to do with the perception of our work and the perception of others about it.

I've flat run out of time. I don't know what you want to do. You've probably got more than you need from me, but if there's subjects you want to come back on...

—

Number one, the specific dates for my Agency positions, first, was Director of Research. I started for a few weeks in Charlie Bray's office when he was Deputy. But then Director of Research was summer of '78 to summer of '80.

I came back from NATO to be Area Director for Europe in the summer of '84 and I became Counselor of the Agency roughly during the Christmas holidays of '84-'85.

Q: Fine, thank you.

1983-1984: The Year of INF Deployment (so-called “Missile Year”) During Burnett's Assignment to NATO. Provides Classic Example of How the Public Diplomacy Process Can and Should Operate

BURNETT: Number two, a specific issue during the NATO tenure of how the work affected that specific issue negatively or positively. Of course, the classic event that we always haul out at this time was INF deployment. But I sort of split my time. It was during the year of the missile, as they called it, that I moved from Rome to NATO. So I did part of it in Rome and part of it in NATO.

So, Pat, even though that's sort of the classic case study, and if you don't have a good record of it from Bill Hamilton and others, I'd really like to contribute to it because I think it is the most important instance we have since the days when we had massive resources in Europe after the war. I think INF deployment was the most significant case of the public diplomacy —the advocacy— process operating about the way most of us feel that it should.

In Washington we had a clear policy objective. It gave us the resources, but then it allowed for five countries to have excellent elbow room to determine the strategy in their own countries. That was almost an ideal.

If we're talking strictly NATO, though, I think that the most interesting example probably was the Soviet walkout from the negotiations in Geneva. Even though I was in Brussels, we were deeply involved with it and with Ambassador Nitze and I think David Michael Wilson was running the operation in Geneva. I was in and out a number of times, sometimes gathering PAOs, or those most affected, to figure out how to operate it.

But, actually, prior to it we went in and we worked with Nitze about how for public purposes you'd dramatize that walkout. I even got into such things — as I was a visiting fireman — as what the photos should look like because we determined that for the press briefing about the walkout it would be a good idea, although we weren't trying to rub it in — we still needed the world to understand who had left the table and who hadn't, because the Soviets were trying to blame us for the breakdown of negotiations because we were deploying the missiles — the photographs of Nitze and the delegation lined up on their side of the table with the other side empty.

But that whole was really a package. Where the orchestration — I speak of orchestration from NATO and yet I could not orchestrate anything because the PAOs didn't report to me, they reported to the area director. The area gave me license to use whatever informal lines of cooperation were necessary, and, in fact, with all the PAOs we worked very closely together.

Campaign for Basing INFs Had to be Tailored by Country

What you had in the basing countries, of course, was not a single problem of public perceptions and attitudes, but five different problems.

In Britain we were doing nothing more than furnishing a little information to the post and the embassy, which went on to Thatcher, and Thatcher and a special task force in the Ministry of Defense were taking the lead and really doing the job in Britain. By that time, by the time I was at NATO, the protests in England had boiled down to the Greenham

Common women just about with the rest of British political society not terribly interested anymore.

In Holland and Germany the Protestant clergymen were still the leaders of the opposition and it was still very public but the numbers in the street weren't quite as great. But it meant that the posts there had to think about the media. They had to think about names from Washington getting on television, and things of that kind.

So, Washington played a vital role. We at NATO, other than facilitating, helping to shape the issues and the arguments, didn't play that great a role. It was largely between Bonn and Washington, between The Hague and Washington.

I'm forgetting Belgium because that was a slower- starting action.

With Italy we were still in the game where we had determined — and this was true when I was there as PAO but then I persisted while I was at NATO — to recognize that a limited number of Italians would be truly decisive for deployment of the missiles, for support for the negotiations, for the general political climate that we needed in Italy.

The general public had lost interest and the political class in Italy does not conceive of issues like that as being those for which the general public should play a strong role anyway. If you're talking about wage indexing, yes. But if you're talking about foreign and military policy, Italy, this extraordinarily democratic society, isn't at that moment very democratic.

There's a small political class that thinks that they're the ones who know best and should call the shots. So, the people can walk in the streets but the politicians largely ignore them.

We had nailed down that body of politicians and journalists. We were dealing with the media not because of concern for the general public but because the media wrote and talked to each other and to the politicians. We had determined 179 key people — I'm sorry,

170 key people. If we worked with an editor, it was because of what he might write for the other 169. It was that closed a circuit.

Q: Very elitist.

BURNETT: Very elitist. Very elitist. But we couldn't change that. Our job was to work with it and make it work.

I continued at NATO to be in close touch with a large number of those 170, working with the PAO, working with the ambassador. We had people from that 170 into Brussels for briefings. I went down to brief occasionally. Nitze went to brief. Rostow went to brief. We got them into Geneva. We really worked on them. In the best sense.

Public Diplomacy at its Best Can Change Minds

That was public diplomacy at its best. It was a civilized discourse with full respect for their concerns, leading toward — and, Pat, you and I have gone through that period when the Agency said, we don't really change minds, we just deliver information, we put on the sack cloth of great modesty.

That was the point where we said, “Baloney. What we're trying to do here is turn people around.” Where it was necessary, we did.

Q: Based, however, on the information that you could provide or the people who provided the information.

BURNETT: Absolutely. Absolutely. It was based on the providing of information. But it's why information is a function. The term has always bothered me a little bit because of its blandness, because of its neutrality.

It was information in the context of advocacy. Advocacy — I don't have to tell you — is not propaganda. Advocacy is serious delivery of information, but not any stance of neutrality.

Q: But let me interject here. I think you made the point, and I think this is one of the points you would like to make — that is that the information was shaped in such a fashion that it was not only meaningful to your interlocutory but it addressed his concern.

BURNETT: Absolutely.

Q: In other words, it wasn't just information kind of cranked out of a mimeograph machine, but it was very carefully crafted and fashioned —

BURNETT: Exactly right.

Q: — to meet the needs of the person that you were conveying it too.

BURNETT: That's right. In the same day you'd talk to one person who didn't want the missiles there because he had heard they didn't work and in fact they had had a couple of bad test firings. So, you know, he just doubted that whole operation.

Another one who didn't want them there because he didn't trust the Americans, he didn't believe we were negotiating seriously in Geneva. He thought that of the NATO two-track decision only the deployment track was operative. These would generally be people of the left — since they didn't swallow the NATO line that what we really hoped for was to get the Soviets to withdraw the SS-20s. If they didn't, then we did the necessary military thing. But our primary objective was that. There were a lot of people who didn't believe that.

Well, those two people, if you tell the latter group — you give them a buildup of how great the missiles are and how well they work, and you give the former group a dose of how forthcoming we are in Geneva, you've taken a step backward with both groups. There have to be very specifically designed information and argumentation relating to each person.

That is on some issues where public diplomacy often becomes a one-to-one discreet targeted effort, a not a media broadside. In some cases a media broadside — as in the case of the German and Dutch situation — is absolutely appropriate. In other cases no.

Q: But what you are also saying, or you're implying in your statement, are you not, is that you need for this type of work individuals who are substantively deep into their matter, who know the substance as well as any "political officer" and have the psychology to understand the problems of your interlocutory?

BURNETT: That's exactly right. Not just the psychology. They've got to have done their homework well enough to be deep enough within the host society — they're still outsiders and they'll always be outsiders — but deep enough within that they are good interlocutors.

It involves certain other things — you know, the sine qua non is the language.

Q: Let me interject one thing here. Have you found that in the Agency there is somewhat of a lack of tolerance for people who are trying to do their homework? In other words, that if you read cables, if you read papers, that somehow people are impatient with you, that you are wasting your time because you are not doing — unquote?

BURNETT: Yeah, I think. I'll tell you what keeps that from being much of a problem. That's distance.

The people with the greatest need to do that are the people sitting overseas. In fact, I may have even said the last time we talked — most of my weekends were devoted to the study that I needed for the week. If I was having lunch with a journalist on Monday, I needed to have read his most recent book and his most recent 20 columns.

If I did, in the first place, he'd be surprised, in the second place, he'd be flattered, in the third place, he'd then take me seriously as an interlocutor. So that I was further into the conversation much more quickly having done that and stood a chance to talk about things.

It was a difference between being a part of his world or being just an American spokesman where, yeah, he'd make notes of what I said but — you know.

As I would sit there doing that study on that weekend, you know, I had to face the fact that Charlie Wick or most of his predecessors didn't have any idea what the hell I was doing. It is the most delicious part of our work and it's the most important of our work. But you're right, it's very poorly understood.

Q: It is not necessarily career-enhancing.

BURNETT: It is not necessarily career-enhancing. That's right. But, on the other hand, for most of us a career that didn't have a subjective political element isn't one that we're terribly interested in. So we do it. But you're absolutely right, there's a tension there.

Career-enhancing would have been to take that Sunday designing a terrific cable about the success of the last Worldnet. Well, we all know those stories.

Q: Can we move on then?

BURNETT: Sure.

Debacle of the Effort to “Sell” the “Neutron Bomb” and the Need to Bring Public Diplomatists in Early on Discussions

Q: You mentioned in our previous interview the debacle or the interesting facets of the neutron device with which we all dealt with at one time or the other when we were overseas during that period.

BURNETT: That's right. Well, the neutron device, it was, of course, known publicly then as the neutron bomb and to us as the enhanced radiation weapon. We tried to insist on our term despite the giggles.

I think the chief interest here is two-fold. One is just what happens when you're working overseas. The other is the serious point — that this is an example — SDI is another one — where had public diplomacy professionals been in at a much earlier stage, for one thing, we might have been able to capture and control better the way the weapon was referred to publicly.

You're not going to get the public to accept a complicated term and the acronym for it if there is a good slang phrase available. But you can provide a slang phrase that is attractive enough to be that which is picked up.

By the time we got to the game a heavy part of the material of perceptions had already been determined. That's the serious message.

We all did the loyal thing about it, and some of us did it with some enthusiasm because it was politically unrealistic but militarily not entirely unsound. But I recall particularly that I was scheduled to speak at the University of Bologna on the subject. I took the train up and got off and I just — the university is about eight blocks from the railroad station — it was a nice day and I just walked up. We didn't have a post there so I was on my own to that extent.

I noticed that there were posters out for it and they had been out long enough that there was already graffiti on the posters. So, it was a kind of hostile atmosphere into which I was walking. It was a kind of hostile auditorium. But they had not yet adopted the — or maybe they were passive. I forget the geography — the style of preventing the speaker with a message they don't want to hear from speaking.

So, I had a chance to have my say, although the question period was clearly going to be lively. But it was while I was having my say that a nice fellow named Dr. Finelli, a physician who ran an Italo-American Friendship Association, or something like that, that taught English in Bologna and who had helped set up that meeting — he had delivered a lot

of our babies, Bill Hamilton's kids, a couple of them, were delivered by Dr. Finelli — he amazed me by walking — it was a stage situation — walking out on the stage and leaving a note for me and going back. The note said he had received a phone call from Rome and we were instructed to stop selling the neutron bomb, that the policy had changed. This while I was on the stand doing just that.

I remember I simply did not have the wit, the ad lib, the words at hand — I was working in Italian so the ad libs didn't come as fast anyway — so I plowed ahead and figured — I'd recognized the fact that I got the note an hour later than I actually got it and I went ahead and at least finished that date.

But that shows the extent to which it — it dramatizes the extent to which we are out there cleaning up messes when the country would benefit from our involvement at an earlier stage, at a more substantive stage, and it almost dramatized the extent to which we were in a puppet role and little else.

That was a debacle. That was a difficult thing and it was very avoidable. Worse yet, it made it impossible ever to revive the idea, even when it was militarily sound.

A Challenge to Area Directors: How Do You Return Substantive Advocacy to Field Posts as Opposed to the Impressarial Role - i.e. Shunting Substantive Role to Ambassador or Bringing in Specialists to Advocate Key Issues

Reading from Pat's list, number four, specific challenges, difficulties in the area director's assignment. What did you do, could you do to return substance in advocacy to posts as opposed to impresario role and bringing in specialists on issues?

Well, I took over in Europe — I was lucky, I was not there during the worst days of Charles Wick's oppression of the posts about Worldnet. He had already realized that he was getting flawed reporting form the posts on Worldnet because of their fear of saying anything bad.

That was as far as it had gone. He was just suspicious. We were able to at least, during that period and then later as counselor, to get to the place where we could shape those critical comments as diagnoses and remedies for a patient that they wanted to help cure.

Wick started not only swallowing them but passing them on to Al Snyder as things to be done and realized that the posts were the best allies he had in making Worldnet work overseas. If he'd give them the chance for a frank dialogue rather than everybody putting their careers on the line any time they spoke of a Worldnet as anything but an unblemished success, that he stood a much better chance of making it a success.

I think that toward the end Wick became fairly realistic. This doesn't mean they weren't still — I swallow to say this on tape but you have to say it — it's not to say that they weren't still fiddling the figures about Worldnet audiences but the relationships with the posts were improved.

On your main question, Pat, you've almost named the greatest challenge in the area director's assignment and the opportunity the area director has. I think that there are two steps. One is the step among ourselves and one is the step to the outside world.

Among ourselves what I did — and it's a little heavy- handed but you don't have too long in office — I didn't serve out a full tour, but even then you know you don't have long and so you feel you have to move quickly.

I rewrote a part of the work requirements of all PAOs in the area. They could do what they wanted about passing on comparable changes for the people that worked for them. I hoped they would do it, but that was their call. So that the first item used the phrase “civilized persuasion to our point of view” and made those management items that had been number one — they were moved to the number two or the number three position.

Most of our people, frankly, are pretty good managers, I think. Those, particularly, that reach senior positions in big posts, they've had to be pretty good managers generally to

arrive there. I think to our detriment sometimes that's been the most important criterion of who does arrive at those senior positions. But I was less worried about management than the role they were playing and to encourage them to get out front in playing that role.

That meant a little bit, to some extent, in such things as protecting them from inspectors who would accuse them of being super IOs and not paying enough attention to the cultural side, which certainly — of course you wanted them to do — that was the heavy part of their resources. They had more resources in that than in information, every last one of them.

A capable CAO who could really have the full stretch of his wings was the best friend that a PAO could have in that situation.

Make Sure the Post Sets Specific Policy Objectives and Makes Certain the Ambassador Fully Agrees With Them

The other thing, there's something that area directors can do and they do a lot of and should be blessed for it, but the posts don't use them enough. That is to make sure that each country plan contains those substantive policy objectives that you want to have. But the two things that are critical, first, to make sure that the ambassador is fully on board and to not talk about the country plan as a USIA country plan, it's the embassy's public affairs plan.

Area Director Sets Policy Objectives for Area and Makes Certain the Assistant Secretary at Department of State Supports Them

But then we had to do the same thing. I wrote a set of area objectives. I took them to the Assistant Secretary for European Affairs. We talked about modifications that he wanted. We debated a little.

I asked him to adopt them and then to send a cable to all ambassadors saying these were the public affairs objectives and make sure that the Secretary was in town so the cable would be signed with the Secretary's name because we needed, for all those distractions — you know, for a PAO often the worst enemy is the ambassador, whether he's a career ambassador who thinks that USIA is getting too deep into political stuff that his State Department is better able to handle, or he's a political appointee for whom it's an ego trip and he wants the PAO to be more of a personal flack for him than a serious diplomat.

For all those things, the PAO needed to be able to have those instructions from Washington to the embassy signed Shultz, and a country plan signed by the ambassador for when he struggled with the ambassador over where the post's resources go.

But even that's not enough. They need — and I'd bet a third of the posts at one time or another need this during the tenure of any PAO. He's got to keep good relations with his ambassador, his career is on the line, it's the only workable situation.

So the area director has to be there to be the guy who sends that telegram to the PAO — orchestrated by the PAO perhaps but still sent — that is a harsh, hard-nosed thing that tells the PAO, you know, I know that you and the ambassador have all these other interests, but, damn it, you have a country plan and the area has some objectives and you must — you must — devote a heavy percentage of your resources to carrying out those objectives with as little distraction as possible for anything else.

When Necessary, Area Director Should Fly into a Post to Support PAO Against Ambassadorial Objection

The PAO should be armed with that and, if necessary, you fly in there and you be the bastard from Washington so the PAO can say, gee, Mr. Ambassador, you know, you've got terrific ideas, I'd love to be doing them but these hard-noses in Washington are ordering us to do this. You've got to carry out that role to help the PAO.

There's such things as getting control, for example, of the IV program. I did my best, and it worked for maybe a dozen posts, to get rid of the Mission Grants Committee and make it clear that all IV grants were determined by the PAO. He solicited recommendations from around the embassy, he met with them, he was cordial to those labor attach#s who were used to getting their grant per year, and the agricultural attach# is used to getting their grant every two years, or whatever.

But the PAO controlled it and it was part of the USIA program. Now, with the change of organization, it was part of his resources, it was to carry out the embassy's country plan and there was no other basis on which IV's could travel.

You've got to give the PAO a lot of help with that because he's going to be very unpopular. But it was crucial to do it.

I think that's the biggest challenge, to get the PAO's first focused on the objectives and then give them the political climate within their embassy so that they can survive doing what they should be doing. With all the usual flexibility, you know, the five percent for cost of doing business that we all swallow as reality and we shouldn't resent.

Q: Stan, but what you are really talking about is changing a culture within USIA. Realizing the problems that exist with other agencies like State, what kind of problems did you encounter within the Agency to that approach? I mean, like the P area, for example.

BURNETT: In the P area, not too much amazingly. First, because of the good people that are there. I mean, among the people who were cheering me on was Mike Schneider, and his chief wasn't terribly interested.

What we were talking about — a more realistic policy focus, and P was right with us — E Bureau — I don't recall having any trouble. I'll tell you what the greatest asset we had — because the greatest problem, frankly, was up top. The greatest problem is when the ambassador phones Charles Wick and says, “Gee, I'm having Grand Old Opry in my

residence in four weeks and your PAO is off doing all sorts of other things when he really should be devoted to making this work because this is the biggest thing we're having in the residence during this season."

You know, there's hell to pay. That's when directors fire PAOs. That's when area directors get called in on the carpet. The greatest problem is exactly that, and it would get pretty bloody at times.

Your greatest asset is the fact that that whole process of managing those relations and determining what the posts should do — unless they let a Worldnet drop or unless there was a bleep from the ambassador, and you did your best to prevent it — the Director's office wasn't terribly interested. We benefitted from benign neglect.

The narrowness of focus of some directors — and Wick was a good example — is sometimes the greatest asset you have to doing the things that need doing. But E and P were generally supportive and were not, during this period, any kind of problem.

Q: How about TV which consumed so much attention both in the reporting and program requirement? I remember being out in the field and if I'd really carried out all the instructions, I would have been working for TV without anybody paying too much attention of what was even said on that TV.

BURNETT: Yeah. Well, no, you're absolutely right. All you do is you handle the rear guard action. You try to get some of all the resources being plowed into TV — and we did a lot of this — I guess in the case of Europe we were able to get out of that about 15 positions sent to the field — you know, assistant IOs and types like that — to manage TV as a way of protecting the resources, the time and attention of the PAO and the IO.

We got a lot of that and we diverted some resources. That helped. It helped the bigger posts anyway.

You try to convince Al — Al Snyder was running TV — try to convince him that the long-term health and positive feedback on the thing really depended upon TVs fitting in with this objective program. Al understood that and bought that and I think made a genuine effort, toward the end particularly, to make that a critical part of his operations. He learned all the language and he would ask about country plans and PAO's desires.

He would, of course — and no blame for him because the pressures were great — he caved in at any time there were pressures, you know. Get a blast from the Director's office, why hasn't Secretary Heimkrotz been on the tube lately, and the answer was that he wasn't in anybody's country plan.

But Al would do what he had to do for survival and messages to the post saying, Secretary Heimkrotz is coming on. You know, it would be written in a way that between the lines a post would read that you'd bloody well better cough up an audience for it.

That became part of the cost of doing business like the flacking for the ambassador, and you do a damage control.

Q: All right. Maybe what we should do, Stan, is move on here to your role as counselor.

BURNETT: Okay. We got a thing we can come back to on Research there later.

Q: Yes.

BURNETT: On 4.5 or —

Q: Well, let's do -

How and in What Way Did Burnett Change the Office of Research Organization and Function?

BURNETT: Well, let me be very quick. 4.5 — this is describing how Research was changed. Here let me be very fast and we can pick up details if you want.

Research had been characterized by long reports averaging more than 100 pages, delivered very slowly. The average time from the time the first draft left the typewriter of the analyst to the time it cleared out of Research was 14 months.

A large focus on review of Agency products of how a library was doing, and things of that kind. To the extent that they were doing attitudinal stuff, it was not so much for the policy process but because they had a lot of what they called longitudinal efforts going in which they had tracked something, like presidential popularity, for the last 15 years and the old pros in Research, by God, they didn't want that string broken. That was their string and they loved it and they wanted to keep those fever charts going even though it was hard to see how — I mean, what do you do about that fever chart in terms of programming action?

It's very hard to say. They were mainly useful to Presidents when they were on the upswing and to the opposition when they were on the downswing. In the latter case, we got in a whole lot of trouble, as in 1960.

The research was — much of it was classified, or at least at the LOU level, and all of it was anonymous. It came out of the Office of Research.

I had pretty good license to break things up and so we did. We reorganized top to bottom. We reorganized on a geographic line so that we lined up better with the way the Agency and State was organized.

No person above the Secretary level had the same job a month later than they started with. With great agonies. It pained so many people, and they are in general lovely people, but it was necessary. Later they closed ranks and were all on our ranks and supportive. But initially it was terrible.

We reduced the report length down to a page and a half average from more than a hundred. We got rid of the review process by several mechanisms. This doesn't mean we weren't concerned about quality, but we got rid of all those boards in which people who had hated each other for years had the opportunity to shoot at each other and gum up the works — down to four days from 14 months from the time it left the analyst.

We made them signed, unclassified pieces of research and encouraged the analysts to publish, to read them at conventions, to do all those things. The greatest quality control we had was the professional ego at that time attached to the reports.

We took all those steps. The result, when it got going — we had a terrible period of war with Hal Schneidman and Alan Carter before it got going — but once it got going reporting directly to Rheinhardt and Bray, we had — I think I even mentioned this the last time — a situation where weekly we were getting stuff back with margin notes by Jimmy Carter, by Brzezinski, in their own hand asking follow-up questions concerned. We were on the map and it was working.

Q: I need to interrupt for one thing here. What you have described, Stan, were management mechanical changes that you've made. Would you focus for a minute for me on the substantive direction —

BURNETT: Sure.

Q: — that research took and the changes that occurred.

BURNETT: Well, as you know, to effect a change you sometimes have to turn the rudder further than you normally would. Afterwards — after I left, I was charged with having put it way out of balance. That's exactly right, I did.

I virtually wiped out all of our research on Agency products. Later on the Hill they complained that there wasn't enough of a quality control or an effectiveness test. Absolutely right. We would have gotten back, if I'd stayed longer, to mid-course.

But we needed a dramatic course correction. For one thing, I needed to plow in enough resources into attitudinal research so that we'd score some victories.

Q: Let me interrupt. When you say attitudinal research, was attitudinal research tied into a policy issue?

BURNETT: Okay. Yes. In general tied to a policy issue, although sometimes in a very long-range way. But the question is for that purpose. We were very clear about the purpose.

The purpose was to help posts and areas and P with planning. That was certainly a part of it. But we elevated to the number one position — again, I think temporarily, but it was necessary — the advisory function of the Director of USIA. By our charter he is the chief advisor on foreign attitudes to the President, the National Security Council and the Secretary of State.

To do that, he's got to have stuff. He's got to know things nobody else knows, and he's fitting into a context where the desk officer in State is receiving lengthy cables on all the interesting aspects of the political situation from State Department officers in the field every day.

The Director needs that which they don't have. Research can provide that. He had those kinds of information that nobody else had. He had authoritative data on attitudes that nobody else had. He needed to be armed with those, he needed to go into every meeting with some nuggets in his pocket. He needed to have communications to the President and the Secretary signed by him with that information, relating it to policy.

If he knew that nuclear arms control was on the table, he needed to hit them right then with the key info about the political climate in key countries for it.

It also meant, I should add, that we had to be so unclassified and so much in the mix that most of what we got we didn't do ourselves, we could acquire. We could acquire from indigenous polling organizations. We could do trades.

We got into the Roper computer, which was a feast for us. Our ticket of admission was to put our own stuff on the Roper computer. It's since been taken off because they've classified it.

Q: Let me ask one question here. The type of research you now describe must have been somewhat overlapping with the political sections. Did you encounter — certainly in the field — any problems in conducting this kind of research? An ambassador saying this is too sensitive —BURNETT: Absolutely.

Q: — hence we don't want it.

BURNETT: Absolutely. In fact, I'm convinced that somewhere in the political section of the ambassador's office in Paris there's a rubber stamp that they just automatically stamp on anything that says the French are too sensitive, you can't do this.

Absolutely. It's one of the reasons some of this stuff gets classified now. There is no way you could say to the ambassador that there won't be a problem. There is always a risk of a magazine article saying the Yanks are trying to dig into our skulls and see what we're thinking and make it sound nefarious.

The only thing you can do is to convince him that the benefits to them, their own operation of their embassy, the USIS operation, will be so great that it's worth the candle. You've got to —

Q: Otherwise the risks that they're taking —

BURNETT: Yeah, you can't deny the risk. We never downplayed the risks. We tried to put a lot in the pan of the scale that talked about the benefit. We didn't always win but we usually won. We usually did what we wanted.

Now, the political officers would always jack up the ambassador about the risks partly because we were a terribly dangerous competitor to them. You're never going to get over that. That's great. Nothing better than to be taken seriously as a competitor. So we plowed ahead and we did every bit as much as we could.

Q: What happened in a case where your research did not jibe with the post's political reporting? Has that happened?

BURNETT: Yes, it happened a lot. Where in most cases I think it's a credit to the intellectual integrity of the officers at the post and at State and all, they recognize that their lives have been complicated and then the questions were reopened again. They wouldn't necessarily buy us out of hand.

Let me give you a fast key example of this going back to INF deployment. Bill Dyess was the ambassador in The Hague, a good career officer. He wrote a terrific cable, one that totally persuaded me. He said, “You know why Europeans don't want these missiles deployed?” He said, “It's summed up in one word. Fear. They don't want these engines of death in their back yard because they fear that it will bring down on their backyard Soviet engines of death.” That's not very plausible militarily, by the way, but that's all right, we're not talking about military plausibility.

Well, he delivered that simple message in about a 15- page cable, but it was clear. We all sat and said, yeah, that's absolutely correct.

I was in Italy then but I couldn't keep my fingers out of research. So I said, you know, this must show up in the research. We'd done some polling in which we tested opposition to deployment in which there were also questions in the same polls like do you expect war, how much they feared the Russians, things like that. There should be a neat correlation, why don't you run it.

They ran it. To my surprise and everybody else's, it came up zero. It was absolutely flat. There was no correlation whatsoever. It really puzzled us. Outside of demographics — I mean, we knew that the left hated deployment more than the right did, and so forth.

I asked them to run a check on everything. Just fish. Everything that was run at the same poll where they tested opposition or support for missile deployment, run every other question. I remember asking for it on a Friday night — this was over the phone — and said we really needed it fast. They ran it on the weekend because these were all my old friends now from research.

It went on and on. I remember it was Sunday afternoon in Rome, which meant Sunday morning in Washington, that I got a call from the guys working in Research because they had just gotten zero through the weekend — when they said “bingo”. They had found a set of four or five questions that in poll after poll showed up with a high mathematical correlation to the feeling about missiles.

They didn't have anything to do with fear or with the feeling about the Soviet Union. They had entirely to do with the feeling about America. They were those standard questions we ask so much, “How do you feel about Americans leadership in the world?” Things like that. “Do you trust America, trust the President?”

That had an enormously high correlation. It meant that feelings about missile deployment were more closely tied to their feelings about the US than anything else. It also meant that as we did our work of persuasion on missile deployment, we were probably the least

important element. The most important element was some CAO 20 years ago who had decided whom to send in the Fulbright program, what students went to America, teaching of English, American studies, all those things. They were probably more important than anything we did at that time. But that's what was crucial.

Well, Dyess I am convinced was wrong. It is to the credit of State and Ambassador Daley who came home from Ireland to supervise the deployment effort. He was persuaded by the figures. So we came to the conclusion that that very persuasive post reporting was wrong. Our research we believed was right. We based the effort to campaign on that belief.

Q: Great. Let's move on to your next one.

Burnett's Concept of Role of Agency Counselor

BURNETT: Where are we? Number 6, Counselor's role, relationship to Director and Deputy. Influence of career service. Any input.

Okay. The Counselor's role is new enough at the Agency that for the first few incumbents it's going to be more determined by the personality of the incumbent and the personality of the director, and so forth, than anything else.

So what I'm really speaking of is my term. I'm sorry, go ahead.

Q: Let me just point out something that you might want to address yourself too.

BURNETT: Right.

Q: That is, the Counselor is the highest career position in USIA. The Director and the Deputy Director are political appointees.

BURNETT: Normally.

Q: Normally. Yeah. We've had one exception really to that.

BURNETT: Yeah.

Q: Do you see anything in that per se that will affect these relationships in that the Counselor becomes truly the inside person or speaks for the Service and does that have a bearing on the whole relationship and the future of the Agency?

Counselor Cannot be Viewed as Spokesman for the Career Service

BURNETT: Well, it does have a bearing. That's a sensitive — you've raised a very sensitive question.

To the extent that the Director views the Counselor as speaking for the career service within the Director's chambers, the Counselor is weakened and things are put into that framework. As you know, we work best when those lines aren't drawn too obviously.

In the first place, you don't represent the career service. You don't have the ability to tap their opinions to be truly representative. In the second place, you don't want to be put in that box where when you offer a view of something, it carries the stamp of okay, that's the career view and then there's the political view.

Counselor Must be Seen as Serving President as Much as Director Is

You've got to be seen — I think the Counselor should be seen as serving the President every bit as much as the Director is. You can't give the political appointees a monopoly on that role.

If USIA Directors continue to be taken from the pool generally of businessmen and media people — those two main categories — as so many of our recent Directors have been,

then one key role for the Counselor is to be the person of policy knowledge, substantive knowledge, continuity, like that.

Because Wick is not a man terribly interested in the substance of policy, Wick was driven into the political life by a personal loyalty to Ronald Reagan. He's not a man of ideas. That's just his personality.

Consequently, the Counselor was allowed to have a lot of leeway for exactly that role. Be at the meetings in State and White House where the substance of policy was really what was on the table and given a lot of elbow room. If our Directors continue to be pulled from those circles, I hope the Counselor continues to play that role.

The Counselor also — I had the role in which — the way Wick had organized it — the Area Directors reported to me and then I reported to the Director and Deputy Director. Because as soon as I took office, immediately the Area Directors were no longer to be, for example, in the- (end of tape)

What we are talking about now is Question 6, the Counselor's role. As I said, Wick's plan was that the Area Directors would move out of that direct contact with the Director in the staff meetings and would be represented by the Counselor.

This seemed to me pure poison and so I asked that the direct line be changed to a dotted line, that the Area Directors continue to report to the Deputy Director and the Director, and that I have a dotted line relationship with them and with all other elements of the Agency and that I have only a solid line relationship to the Director in that I should be at the side of the Director on the organization chart, not below.

Because it was the first few days when we had not yet fully agreed on whether or not I would take the job permanently or was simply filling in until Wick had a deputy, I had more poker chips at that point and so he granted that. So we kept the Area Directors in the staff meetings and into direct contact and my relationship was dotted.

Nevertheless, I still held a weekly meeting of the Area Directors which I think was fairly useful.

Q: In your role as Counselor though, did you implement what you had done as Area Director that each one of them wrote an area plan?

BURNETT: I did not. Recognizing that relationship that I just mentioned, I encouraged them to it. Europe already had it that way. Two of the remaining four did and two didn't. They were not all persuaded that that was the right track. In one case, one that didn't, was persuaded it was the right track but felt that there was no chance of State and the Assistant Secretary getting on board so he simply wanted to delay.

So, no, there wasn't perfect agreement. But after the first year we had three of the five following that path. The others were in effect saying we can accomplish it in other ways. So they hadn't necessarily fallen off, and it may mean that for their areas they had more effective methods.

The Deputy Director was critical to what we were talking about before. Marvin Stone was very sensitive to my concern that I not be seen as a representative of the courier service. He and I just had an enormous rapport — if we had five minutes together, I have the feeling we could agree on anything.

I don't remember a poignant or serious substantive disagreement with Marvin. Obviously I attribute it to his enormous wisdom that we always came out the same.

So that when we went into Wick, Marvin was talking about what Stan and I thought and I was talking about what Marvin and I thought, and very quickly I think we got rid of that bifurcation between the political appointees in Wick's chambers, between the political appointees and the career officers. I think it was useful to do so.

Beyond the substantive role, I clearly had a management role, however informal, with the areas. Wick regularly fired PAOs and fired Area Directors. My role became one of interrupting the firing process and putting things right. I'm not exaggerating.

I remember the first three months or so, I think he asked for the head of all but one of the Area Directors and really a fairly large number of PAOs. That was his reaction to a lot of stuff. Later it wasn't, but it was.

I also met, for example, informally weekly with Angie Garcia and later with Harlan Rosacker, in which we would simply — I was playing no official role. We chatted about the assignments. But they were very good. They sought that chatting.

Then, I was a part of the Senior Officer Assignments Panel, which included the associate Director for Management, the Personnel Director and the Foreign Service Personnel Chief.

We developed — Charles Wick, who was thought of, I am sure, by some outsiders as a great meddler in personnel questions, has a better record than any of his predecessors that way, I believe. Very soon we developed a situation where not only he accepted all of the views of the Senior Officer Assignments Panel, but I was permitted to inform him of them rather than have him clear them.

He made, during the time I was Counselor, three or four assignments himself in which he had an officer to whom he owed a serious debt of gratitude and he wanted to pay off. I think that is a very low number. I'll bet few Directors come off that low.

Q: Let me throw you a curve.

BURNETT: Okay.

Q: At this point.

BURNETT: Good.

Q: This assignment process, terribly important, did it work to help institutionalize some of the ideas that you wanted to perpetuate?

In other words, you had mentioned before in our interview, that whether you are Area Director or Research Director, you have to stay a certain time before things become institutionalized. Washington is the revolving door syndrome city. So, could you institutionalize through the assignment and personnel system some of the ideas that you wanted to get across?

BURNETT: Wow. that's really a curve. Yes, I think you could and I am sure that I did a lot of it, but it was subconscious in that I am sure it affected my own view of who was a good officer and who wasn't and thereby affected the assignment process. But I tried, because I think it would have been unfair — I think these are legitimately open questions.

I had a view and I think it was very open to debate. That's why I made no effort to enforce it on Area Directors. I think it would have been wrong of me to try to enforce it in the assignment process and to try to get these ideas planted and institutionalized by putting the right people in the right place.

So consciously I didn't try to and I didn't. But you put it in the worst way, and I can't believe that that wasn't the effect of a number of my assignments. I shouldn't say my assignment — our assignments. We generally had good agreement.

The Associate Director for Management, I have to say, there was contention he never got his way because he just didn't assert himself much on it. In the end — I really appreciated this — in the end, Woody Kingman would make his case, then he would say, well, okay, you guys know best. You know these people.

So we had a good control on the assignment process with those few exceptions and I didn't resent those at all. I think that is a very low number. I don't know what picture you may have of the Counselor fighting, but I didn't fight Wick at all on them.

Wick said I want to take care of that officer and I want him to go to that kind of post and we — it was functioning at that low level — just as I say, there weren't more than three, four — I bet there weren't five. I bet it is more like three or four the entire three years.

I'll tell you frankly, my reaction was, sure, Chief, you occasionally have to be able to take care of people like that, and I went back to Senior Officer Assignments in personnel and said the Director wants it that way and I think he is right and I want it that way and let's go.

Wick never used that to expand his participation. I mean sensitive posts, the most senior posts — we told him about it after the fact. I would try to get to him in the few hours between the time we made the decision and the time the cables went out. If he were available, I said here is what's happening. I only read the ones where he knew the people because I didn't want — otherwise it was just a name to him.

But if he wasn't available, we sent the cables. It was an informing function and he permitted it that way, and I was really grateful to him. It was an investment of faith in the professional service that was terribly important and it was greater than his predecessors were willing to do.

Q: Stan, because of the time restraints, let me point you in one direction, and that is the Agency's relation to the Voice. It is the largest single unit of USIA, the one that consumes most of its resources and actual dollars, certainly in personnel.

Many charges have been made that certainly during the Reagan Administration the Voice has become the most politicized it has ever been. What do you think should be the relationship, also from where you sit as Counselor, that the Voice ever enter into considerations as a subject, what should be the relationship Agency to Voice? Should

the Voice be independent from USIA, much like the BBC is divorced as an independent Agency of the British government?

Difficulties in Managing VOA

BURNETT: Pat, I don't remember — as I said, I met weekly with the Area Directors — I don't remember a meeting that didn't have Voice items on the agenda. It was terribly important but it was also such a constant pain.

The Voice, in the first place, is this impossible thing to manage. I feel for any Director of the Voice of America. Partly because of the huge emigre population that works for the Voice with all the political baggage and in- fighting they bring with them.

One of my roles as Counselor was to handle equal employment opportunity cases that couldn't be handled by the office. I was supposed to dispose of them. I had probably twenty of those a year. I didn't have one that wasn't from the Voice. A hundred percent from the Voice. Ninety percent were either people who were being discriminated against because they were Jewish or people who were being discriminated against because they weren't.

Q: Oh, yes.

BURNETT: It was painful. I remember one time when we laid off half the Georgian service and the other half were terribly disaffected anyway. It was just chaos.

Q: I was there during that period.

BURNETT: Okay. You know. Sure, you know that. I remember — maybe, Pat, it was you that I asked — I got worried — I wondered what these guys are putting out over the air. I called somebody, and it probably would have been you because you were always the greatest source of straight answers.

I said how do we know what's going on over the Georgian service and the process was described to me that periodically every few weeks, tapes, I presumed taken randomly off the air, were packaged up and sent to a Georgian living in Israel who had a contract for us to report on — you know he would write a report and send it back. I found that terrifying. Anyway, it's a difficult management job.

When I talked about the makeup of the senior officer assignments, the one reason I hesitated was I knew that there was another body at the table and couldn't remember who it was. Who it was was the VOA personnel chief, who also participated because we passed on those assignments.

It's a huge management problem. As you know, one of the worst problems for any Director are the end runs to the Hill that the Voice continually does.

We say this on the day when the cutting of six language services is in the newspaper, but cutting a language service is one of the most politically difficult things a Director can do because immediately — — however obscure that language service is, it turns out that five million people throughout America are hyphenated Americans coming from that section, they are working on their representatives and all hell breaks loose on the Hill.

The Voice's capacity to lobby, not from the top, not the Director, but have lobbyists crawl out of every pore of the Voice, as you know better than I do, and it makes it an enormous political problem.

VOA and Television Should Not be Separated from the Agency

I don't believe that the Voice and television should be separated from USIA despite all the agonies that this causes.

First, the argument that's normally made for it has to do with the prestige of BBC, how that benefits from BBC independence, and it gives them that credibility that a lot of people in

the Voice envy around the world. I don't think the BBC gets its credibility because of the knowledge of some guy in Sudan of what the organizational structure is in London. He doesn't know that. It comes from what he hears.

The BBC isn't entirely divorced from government. They are partially divorced from government. I don't think he understands that. I don't think that's what it comes from. I don't think the situation at the Voice of America would radically change in terms of overseas credibility by organizational changes in Washington. I just don't believe that.

I do think that the Voice is so important that it should be a critical part of that whole public diplomacy policy and strategy process. I think, if anything, the Voice isn't tied in enough. This doesn't mean that in any way you would fiddle the basis of the credibility which is straight news reporting.

But the Director of the Voice of America should be right there in many of those same circles and be a part of that process so that he understands and carries out that strategy, and I don't think that fragmentation is the key to a coherent public diplomacy strategy. Just the opposite. I think coordination is.

Q: To what degree have Voice or Voice problems been raised at the NSC level that you have been aware of?

Let me give you one specific example. We had a leftover priority that was passed down from the NSC about priorities for languages that hadn't been looked at in years —

BURNETT: I remember that.

Q: — and it was asinine and made no sense in terms of the policy requirements of the United States, and I am talking about USIA.

I tried to work it and have it revised for a number of reasons because of the resources and all the things that flow from it, and nobody wanted to touch it.

BURNETT: Sure.

Q: Neither in the Voice, certainly not in the Agency, so I am still looking at this as one example of my dismal failure to really effect something important.

BURNETT: And then there would always be that old canard that they would haul out in ways that real folks couldn't talk about. Should there be an emergency, DOD and CIA were dependent upon having certain radio capacity so we couldn't really cut them out. Oh, boy. We got hit. We know about that.

You said it in the right way and the way that's telling. I remember the Voice being the subject of a number of discussions at State and the White House, but always as a problem, always because something had gone wrong. An Ambassador didn't like what a VOA correspondent had written or didn't like what he heard on the air in broadcast in the language service of his country. Things like that.

It is a sign of the fact that we are not too much — that we are too much fragmented, not too well coordinated, that it was rare that the Voice was discussed as an asset that the top policymakers wanted to use as an important part of the achieving of their policy objectives when they should have. It is a huge asset and they should have been thinking about how you use it.

When we would approach a summit — you remember this — when we would approach a summit, how would they think about the Voice? They never thought how you use the Voice to create the right political climate. They would worry about the Voice saying things that would louse up the atmosphere.

Jack Matlock, before he went out to Moscow, was probably the most extreme example of this. He would sit in the NSC and say I don't want anything go out over the Voice about the Soviet Union in the two months leading up to the summit that I haven't cleared.

In other words, the preoccupation was negative. The Voice is a danger. That shows how far we still have to go in coherent and positive thinking about public diplomacy strategy.

Q: Was there any cognizance of the Voice's congressionally mandated charter? You know, that knows — you don't fiddle with it, you know, it is straight forward, objective unvarnished -

BURNETT: Sure, there was. Sure, there was. But there was a misunderstanding of it. It was somehow that that put the Voice — made it not interesting as a possible asset for carrying out the policy objectives. Too bad.

Q: All right. Is there anything you want to add that I have not asked?

Closing Observations Regarding Agency Attitudes and Problems G. Lewis Schmidt

BURNETT: Pat, I think you have covered all the interesting things. Please come back if there are areas you want to explore more.

You just now pointed particularly to the question about personnel policy and the old boys network reward. I don't want to use this opportunity to editorialize, but part of my own experience shows that I think that public diplomacy now has an importance to America in its relations with the world that still — even though we have passed out of this place where we worry about being second-class citizens at the embassy, I didn't hear that much in the last years at all — it still is not well enough recognized and doesn't affect our careers enough. There are still disincentives in terms of the game that people will be allowed to play when they arrive at senior levels that keep us constantly in danger of losing our best

people. I am thinking of the bars to advancement of key officers at this level. To cite the most serious:

(1) The development in recent years that has put political appointees at the heads of all our major organizational elements. Every one of these positions used to be filled at the discretion of the Agency Director and, with rare exceptions, went to senior career officers. Now all those Washington top spots are closed to career people. Usually a career officer, who knows the job requirements, is made Deputy Associate Director. He/she does the great majority of the work without the prestige of a title. It is demeaning and discouraging. There has even been a tendency on occasion to try to place political appointees in key overseas positions, thus further closing the doors of career advancement.

(2) The near universal failure to recognize the value of the best performers in the cultural side by permitting them the prestige and job satisfaction of joining our best PAOs in the top levels in our classified career service. I discussed this problem to some extent in the first part of this interview where we were talking about the dangers that arise when a strong PAO intervenes in the CAO's area of concern.

(3) There should be greater provision for granting bonus pay to outstanding performers among our senior ranks both in the information and cultural ranks. I think we get most of the good people we would want to get, but I'm not sure we retain them for the reasons I have cited..

I am a firm believer in the moves that have been made toward cultural affairs officers being able to obtain the highest positions and grades in our service without necessarily becoming PAOs. I think that the strongest big posts I know of have had a senior CAO sometimes more senior than the PAO who is a known personality in the cultural scene of that country. Because in most countries we are the only people who have public affairs officers. In general, other major countries don't know what the hell a PAO is. That's all right

if they have an effective CAO and an effective press attach#. Those are posts that they understand.

I think the PAO, if he is permitted to focus on his relation to current and long-term policy issues, probably comes closer to doing. There is a role there that the IO probably does not have the seniority in the community, both the embassy community and the overseas community, to be carry out, and the PAO should have the possibility of carrying it out.

By the same token, I hope that more and more we consider that we can reach the pinnacle of our own service without necessarily changing our trade and becoming ambassadors. Obviously, I don't think that there are enough USIA ambassadors, partly because I think that if they were to skim the cream off USIA, the caliber of ambassadors would improve.

But I faced this decision myself, and I know several others. I have a good colleague who was offered the ambassadorship to Peru and chose instead to be PAO in Beijing, and I am glad he made that decision. It was a more interesting job and more important that he do it, more important for the US I made a similar decision myself.

I don't feel that we have arrived when we have a half dozen ambassadors. I think we've arrived when the PAOs have the stature in the role they should have at the posts and where the Agency and the Director of the Agency plays the role that he should in Washington. For me it doesn't translate into — I don't think the pinnacle of our profession is standing there holding a glass at National Day receptions as the end of our professional careers.

So, I am in — I guess the expression is a slight dissatisfaction with both the character and the state of our ambitions for ourselves and our Agency.

Q: Let me interject one question here because I think you have started to touch on it already when you talked about a super CAO. Do you believe it would be helpful to our service, USIA, if we could give financial rewards within even the structure of the

government salary thing without necessarily promoting people into positions of their highest degree of incompetence.

BURNETT: Yeah.

Q: In other words, if somebody is a very creative policy-thinker or CAO or an IO, I mean to give them the money that would go with a PAO or a minister's job, if he deserves it without, making him a —

BURNETT: That's right, and to some extent the bonus system in the senior foreign service does a bit of that. A lot of people really get a significant augmentation of their income that way and that appreciated.

I think your point is a good one, and I guess both of the points I was making sort of tend to that direction, not to force people to change trade in order to get, you know, the best expectable job satisfaction. I think that would help a great deal and I think it's a good idea.

The fact is, though, that none of us are in it for the money. Or, if we are, we've made a lousy choice. I think that the remuneration should be extensively improved. I suffered under the cap for the last fifteen years of my service and paid a very heavy price. I don't think I should have paid that heavy price.

On the other hand, I think we should always be just below comparable positions — as if there were such because there really aren't — comparable positions on the outside because I don't want anybody in there because they are there for the money. I want them there because they are political animals and they have ideas of service and things like that and they pay a small price. But we are paying much too big a price.

Q: We all have to feed families, however, and educate our children and that is one of the prices that becomes —

BURNETT: That's right. None of us are living on grates. However, if you look at some of the operations that we manage, both the size of the management job and the sensitivity of the issues we touch, there are a lot of us who have been at levels for which people are paid a quarter of a million dollars a year, which, of course, we shouldn't be.

I hate to say it, but I think our officer corps is — I still remember the term, the only term that came to my mind in my farewell remarks — is the very salt of the earth — for all that means. Pleasure of being with them and the caliber of people.

I think the caliber is going to decline. I think that we risk becoming second-rate. If the tremendous role that public diplomacy must play in American consideration isn't recognized and isn't made more workable than it is right now, I don't think the — financial satisfaction, yes, but satisfaction has to come from other ways. There have to be fewer officers leaving the service because what was available for them to do was really a step below what they thought they were at that point capable of doing and the contribution they were capable making.

Q: Stan, now the final question, and I am sorry. Talk a little bit in view, if you would, of the Agency's relationship to the Congress, how it can better sell itself. Who should sell it? Is it the Director, the Counselor? Should the Agency draw in more of the Area Directors or its staff? How can USIA do a better job vis-a-vis the Hill and really be more accepted?

BURNETT: Well I think that — I'm afraid I'm going to give you an answer that you are not expecting. I don't think there is a general rule about that interfacing with the Hill. You need somebody in congressional liaison who is so sensitive to the tactics, understands the personalities involved, that he knows occasion by occasion, whether it should be the Director or the Counselor or an area director.

I got into the system occasionally of bringing in PAOs with the mud of the field on their boots and hauling them up and talking to certain Congressmen. It is very effective. Frankly the Congressmen wanted to talk to them more than they wanted to talk to us.

Q: Sure.

BURNETT: Very effective. Boy, you bring in a Terry Catherman or a McKinney Russell in a role like that and he can do the Agency more good than any of the Washington types could.

So I think you need somebody in congressional liaison who orchestrates that with great skill. But let me tell you that the greatest place for our improvement is in the pre-congressional step, and that's OMB.

One last bit of history, but I think it is illustrative. As Area Director, I had one budget cycle to go through only because I was short-time there. We had OMB hearings and it was announced that this time they were going to be serious. Each area director was going to have a whole half day. We'd have Stan Silverman to back us up and the usual thing, but we had better prepare for a real grilling by a new team, a full half day and we all prepared.

I'm afraid here I really did get dogmatic about my ideas. Well, I had in a notebook all the info about how many cultural centers, and how many employees, and where we had been cut in the past, all those usual things. That was the substance of the presentation of my other four colleagues. Each of them came out with an OMB recommendation of something like 85 or 90 percent of the level they had been at.

I didn't touch on any of that. I talked about the President's programs. I did some calculations and they were — you've been asked to do the same things so you know that they are fictive, but I did them anyway — as to what percentage of our effort was going

into selling SDI and what percentage was going into creating a good understanding and support in Europe for our policy in Central America.

I confronted the OMB in saying now, if you want us to do less on SDI, you know, what the hell, we can do 50 percent of what we are doing. We can do less on SDI. The President's men, knowing the priorities, sat there in agony and I wound up with an OMB recommendation of 115 percent of what we had requested.

We, by taking our hits before we even get to the Hill, we are so weakened by the time we get there that I think more focus should be put on that pre-Hill stage, the OMB phase, and converting it into close attachment to substantive issues in the President's program.

I think that would translate into simply doing better with resources because we would have — instead of having the Secretary and OMB not only coming in low with what they recommend, but killing us in the corridors. I think we would do lots better.

I believe that there is a pattern in the history of the fairly large posts in “Westernized” countries. Those qualifiers are important, because I'm not suggesting any larger rule. I believe that there is an overall record of turbulence, broken assignments and periods of significant ineffectiveness at posts where the structure has largely been one of a PAO with strong cultural ambitions, thirstily grabbing the spotlight as the main American cultural presence in the host capital, which means both a fairly subservient role for the CAO and a certain neglect of a set of opportunities (below) relative to policy advocacy. Paris is the example we talked about, where PAO-CAO conflict has been endemic, and where the press operation has been entirely captured, even physically, by the Ambassador's office.

The other model involves the PAO's sacrifice of a bit of glory to permit the CAO, who should be very senior and have excellent credentials for the country, to be the most prominent American cultural figure (which makes it easier for most foreigners who understand cultural attach#s but don't know what the hell a PAO is.) The PAO, who will then be accused of trying to be a “Super IO” in this pattern, devotes a heavy part of his

energies to that band of media and political figures who are the real molders of opinion, including editors, publishers, columnists, producers, party ideologues and spokesmen, et cetera. Most of these will see the Ambassador only occasionally (and nothing important may happen when they do unless the Ambassador is exceptional) and will usually not be available to an Information Officer or a Press Attach#. The PAO thus becomes deeply involved with the Ambassador's policy concerns, not with his next soiree. Rome-under-Jock-Shirley is a good example of this model, and I believe you find a record generally of tranquility and accomplishment.

Q: Stan, thank you very much. Most instructive and most enlightening. Thank you very much.

End of interview